WISDOM COMMENTARY

Philippians Colossians Philemon

Elsa Tamez, Cynthia Kittredge, Claire Colombo, Alicia J. Batten

Barbara E. Reid, OP, *General Editor*

VISIT…

All content available from the Liturgical Press website is protected by copyright and is owned or controlled by Liturgical Press.

You may print or download to a local hard disk the e-book content for your personal and non-commercial use only equal to the number of copies purchased. Each reproduction must include the title and full copyright notice as it appears in the content.

UNAUTHORIZED COPYING, REPRODUCTION, REPUBLISHING, UPLOADING, DOWNLOADING, DISTRIBUTION, POSTING, TRANSMITTING OR DUPLICATING ANY OF THE MATERIAL IS PROHIBITED.

ISBN: 978-0-8146-8225-8

PHILIPPIANS, COLOSSIANS, PHILEMON

Editorial Consultants

Athalya Brenner-Idan

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

Editorial Board

Mary Ann Beavis

Carol J. Dempsey

Amy-Jill Levine

Linda M. Maloney

Ahida Pilarski

Sarah Tanzer

Lauress Wilkins Lawrence

Seung Ai Yang

WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 51

Philippians

Elsa Tamez

Colossians

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge and Claire Miller Colombo

Philemon

Alicia J. Batten

Mary Ann Beavis

Volume Editor

Barbara E. Reid, OP

General Editor

A Michael Glazier Book

LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Elsa Tamez would like to dedicate her portion of this commentary
to Miriam Ofelia in her eightieth year, deeply appreciated friend,
admirable for her energy and her commitment to the struggles
of Third World women.
To women and men imprisoned
because they dared to think differently from those in power.
To people who visit prisoners.

A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press

Cover design by Ann Blattner. *Chapter Letter 'W'*, *Acts of the Apostles*, *Chapter 4*, Donald Jackson, Copyright 2002, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2017 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tamez, Elsa, author. Philippians. | Kittredge, Cynthia Briggs, author. Colossians. | Batten, Alicia J., author. Philemon.
Title: Philippians / Elsa Tamez. Colossians / Cynthia Briggs Kittredge and Claire Miller Colombo. Philemon / Alicia Batten ; Mary Ann Beavis, Volume Editor ; Barbara E. Reid, OP, General Editor.
Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2016. | Series: Wisdom commentary ; Volume 51 | "A Michael Glazier Book." | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016010740 (print) | LCCN 2016030156 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814682005 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780814682258 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Philippians—Commentaries. | Bible. Colossians—Commentaries. | Bible. Philemon—Commentaries.
Classification: LCC BS2705.53 .P45 2016 (print) | LCC BS2705.53 (ebook) | DDC 227/.607—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016010740

Contents

List of Abbreviations vii

List of Contributors ix

Foreword: *"Come Eat of My Bread . . . and Walk in the Ways of Wisdom"* xi
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary: *"She Is a Breath of the Power of God" (Wis 7:25)* xv
Barbara E. Reid, OP

Author's Introduction to Philippians 1

Philippians 1:1-26 *Greetings, Prayers, and Prison* 37

Philippians 1:27–3:1 *Causes, Struggles, and Plans* 65

Philippians 3:2–4:3 *What Really Matters* 87

Philippians 4:4-23 *Words of Gratitude and Farewell* 107

Conclusion 120

Authors' Introduction to Colossians 123

Colossians 1:1–2:5 *Greetings, Prayers, and Paul* 141

Colossians 2:6-23 *Warning against Practices* 167

Colossians 3:1–4:1 *Exhortation to Those Who Are in Christ* 179

Colossians 4:2-18 *Further Exhortations and Greetings* 193

Author's Introduction to Philemon 201

Philemon 1-18 *Allies and Tension* 235

Philemon 19-25 *The Silence of Onesimus* 253

Conclusion 263

Philippians Works Cited 265

Colossians Works Cited 271

Philemon Works Cited 275

Index of Scripture References 281

Index of Subjects 285

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
Bib.	*Biblica*
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
ConBNT	Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series
Dig.	*Digesta seu Pandectae*
Ep.	Pliny, *Epistulae*
Eph.	Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship

HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JFSR	*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LS	*Louvain Studies*
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NTG	New Testament Guides
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PNTC	Pelican New Testament Commentaries
Rhet.	Aristotle, *Rhetorica*
RIBLA	*Revista Bíblica Latinoamericana*
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSP	Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
SNTSMS	Society of new Testament Studies Manuscript Series
SP	Sacra Pagina Series
SymS	Symposium Series
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*

Contributors

Frei Betto is Brazilian, a Dominican brother, liberation theologian, and author of more than sixty books of different genres. He was imprisoned in 1969 because of his participation in the resistance movement against the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985). He is an activist for human rights. His contribution to this book comes from *Cartas da prisão (Letters from Prison 1967–1973*) and a personal letter sent for this commentary.

Carolina C. Dionco is the academic dean of the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies (IFRS) in Quezon City, Philippines. She is also a faculty member of the Theology and Religious Education Department at De La Salle University Manila.

Carmiña Navia is a Colombian theologian, poet, and essayist. She is professor of literature in the Universidad del Valle in Cali, Colombia; she is cofounder and director of the Casa Cultural Tejiendo Sororidades (Cultural Center "Weaving Sisterhood"). She has published several books and articles on literary criticism as well as rereadings of biblical texts and theological reflections. In 1994, she was kidnapped by the Colombian guerrilla ELN (National Liberation Army) for twelve days. She sent a letter for this commentary about her captivity in the jungle.

Neila Serrano is Colombian and holds a PhD in pharmacology from the University of Sorbonne in Paris; she studied rheumatology and respiratory allergies at Harvard University. She was imprisoned in the women's prison El Buen Pastor (The Good Shepherd) in Bogotá (1993–1995) by

the government for paying a ransom to the guerrilla organization M19 (19 Movement, now demobilized). She is a professor at the National University in Bogotá and activist speaker on Bible and science in evangelical churches. Her contribution comes from an interview that she gave for this commentary.

Annie Tinsley is the assistant professor of New Testament at Shaw University Divinity School. She is the author of *Re-Reading Colossians: Identity, Reception, and Interpretation under the Gaze of Empire* (2013). Dr. Tinsley has been a scholar in residence at New York University.

Demetrius K. Williams is an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee with a joint appointment in the French, Italian, and Comparative Literature (FICL) Department and the Religious Studies Program. He also serves as an associate adjunct professor at the Central Baptist Theological School–Milwaukee Center and as the senior pastor of the Community Baptist Church of Greater Milwaukee.

Foreword

"Come Eat of My Bread . . . and Walk in the Ways of Wisdom"

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza
Harvard University Divinity School

Jewish feminist writer Asphodel Long has likened the Bible to

> a magnificent garden of brilliant plants, some flowering, some fruiting, some in seed, some in bud, shaded by trees of age old, luxurious growth. Yet in the very soil which gives it life the poison has been inserted. . . . This poison is that of misogyny, the hatred of women, half the human race.[1]

To see Scripture as such a beautiful garden containing poisonous ivy requires that one identify and name this poison and place on all biblical texts the label "Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival!" As critical feminist interpretation for well-being this Wisdom

1. Asphodel Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions: The Search for the Female in the Deity* (London: Women's Press, 1992), 195.

Commentary seeks to elaborate the beauty and fecundity of this Scripture-garden and at the same time points to the harm it can do when one submits to its world of vision. Thus, feminist biblical interpretation engages two seemingly contradictory insights: The Bible is written in kyriocentric (i.e., lord/master/father/husband-elite male) language, originated in the patri-kyriarchal cultures of antiquity, and has functioned to inculcate misogynist mind-sets and oppressive values. At the same time it also asserts that the Bible as Sacred Scripture has functioned to inspire and authorize wo/men[2] in our struggles against dehumanizing oppression. The hermeneutical lens of wisdom/Wisdom empowers the commentary writers to do so.

In biblical as well as in contemporary religious discourse the word *wisdom* has a double meaning: It can either refer to the quality of life and of people and/or it can refer to a figuration of the Divine. Wisdom in both senses of the word is not a prerogative of the biblical traditions but is found in the imagination and writings of all known religions. Wisdom is transcultural, international, and interreligious. Wisdom is practical knowledge gained through experience and daily living as well as through the study of creation and human nature. Both word meanings, that of capability (wisdom) and that of female personification (Wisdom), are crucial for this Wisdom Commentary series that seeks to enable biblical readers to become critical subjects of interpretation.

Wisdom is a state of the human mind and spirit characterized by deep understanding and profound insight. It is elaborated as a quality possessed by the sages but also treasured as folk wisdom and wit. Wisdom is the power of discernment, deeper understanding, and creativity; it is the ability to move and to dance, to make the connections, to savor life, and to learn from experience. Wisdom is intelligence shaped by experience and sharpened by critical analysis. It is the ability to make sound choices and incisive decisions. Its root meaning comes to the fore in its Latin form *sapientia*, which is derived from the verb *sapere*, to taste and to savor something. Hence, this series of commentaries invites readers to taste, to evaluate, and to imagine. In the figure of *Chokmah-Sophia-Sapientia-Wisdom*, ancient Jewish scriptures seek to hold together belief in the "one" G*d[3] of Israel with both masculine and feminine language and metaphors of the Divine.

2. I use wo/man, s/he, fe/male and not the grammatical standard "man" as inclusive terms and make this visible by adding /.

3. I use the * asterisk in order to alert readers to a problem to explore and think about.

In distinction to traditional Scripture reading, which is often individualistic and privatized, the practice and space of Wisdom commentary is public. Wisdom's spiraling presence (*Shekhinah*) is global, embracing all creation. Her voice is a public, radical democratic voice rather than a "feminine," privatized one. To become one of Her justice-seeking friends, one needs to imagine the work of this feminist commentary series as the spiraling circle dance of wisdom/Wisdom.[4] To imagine the feminist work of this commentary series as a Spirit/spiritual intellectual movement in the open space of wisdom/Wisdom who calls readers to critically analyze, debate, and reimagine biblical texts and their commentaries as wisdom/Wisdom texts inspired by visions of justice and well-being for everyone and everything, Wisdom-Sophia-imagination engenders a different understanding of Jesus and the movement around him. It understands him as the child and prophet of Divine Wisdom and as Wisdom herself instead of imagining him as ruling King and Lord who has only subalterns but not friends. To approach the New* Testament[5] and the whole Bible as Wisdom's invitation of cosmic dimensions means to acknowledge its multivalence and its openness to change. As bread—not stone.

In short, this commentary series is inspired by the feminist vision of the open cosmic house of Divine Wisdom-Sophia as it is found in biblical Wisdom literatures, which include the New* Testament:

> Wisdom has built Her house
> She has set up Her seven pillars . . .
> She has mixed Her wine,
> She also has set Her table.
> She has sent out Her wo/men ministers
> to call from the highest places in the town . . .
> "Come eat of my bread
> and drink of the wine I have mixed.
> Leave immaturity, and live,
> And walk in the way of Wisdom." (Prov 9:1-3, 5-6)

4. I have elaborated such a Wisdom dance in terms of biblical hermeneutics in my book *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). Its seven steps are a hermeneutics of experience, of domination, of suspicion, of evaluation, of remembering or historical reconstruction, of imagination, and of transformation. However, such Wisdom strategies of meaning making are not restricted to the Bible. Rather, I have used them in workshops in Brazil and Ecuador to explore the workings of power, Condomblé, Christology, imagining a the*logical wo/men's center, or engaging the national icon of Mary.

5. See the discussion about nomenclature of the two testaments in the introduction, page xxxi.

Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary

"She Is a Breath of the Power of God" (Wis 7:25)

Barbara E. Reid, OP

General Editor

Wisdom Commentary is the first series to offer detailed feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible. The fruit of collaborative work by an ecumenical and interreligious team of scholars, the volumes provide serious, scholarly engagement with the whole biblical text, not only those texts that explicitly mention women. The series is intended for clergy, teachers, ministers, and all serious students of the Bible. Designed to be both accessible and informed by the various approaches of biblical scholarship, it pays particular attention to the world in front of the text, that is, how the text is heard and appropriated. At the same time, this series aims to be faithful to the ancient text and its earliest audiences; thus the volumes also explicate the worlds behind the text and within it. While issues of gender are primary in this project, the volumes also address the intersecting issues of power, authority, ethnicity, race, class, and religious belief and practice. The fifty-eight volumes include the books regarded as canonical by Jews (i.e., the Tanakh); Protestants (the "Hebrew Bible" and the New Testament); and Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox Communions (i.e., Tobit, Judith, 1 and

2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, including the Letter of Jeremiah, the additions to Esther, and Susanna and Bel and the Dragon in Daniel).

A Symphony of Diverse Voices

Included in the Wisdom Commentary series are voices from scholars of many different religious traditions, of diverse ages, differing sexual identities, and varying cultural, racial, ethnic, and social contexts. Some have been pioneers in feminist biblical interpretation; others are newer contributors from a younger generation. A further distinctive feature of this series is that each volume incorporates voices other than that of the lead author(s). These voices appear alongside the commentary of the lead author(s), in the grayscale inserts. At times, a contributor may offer an alternative interpretation or a critique of the position taken by the lead author(s). At other times, she or he may offer a complementary interpretation from a different cultural context or subject position. Occasionally, portions of previously published material bring in other views. The diverse voices are not intended to be contestants in a debate or a cacophony of discordant notes. The multiple voices reflect that there is no single definitive feminist interpretation of a text. In addition, they show the importance of subject position in the process of interpretation. In this regard, the Wisdom Commentary series takes inspiration from the Talmud and from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss [New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008]), in which many voices, even conflicting ones, are included and not harmonized.

Contributors include biblical scholars, theologians, and readers of Scripture from outside the scholarly and religious guilds. At times, their comments pertain to a particular text. In some instances they address a theme or topic that arises from the text.

Another feature that highlights the collaborative nature of feminist biblical interpretation is that a number of the volumes have two lead authors who have worked in tandem from the inception of the project and whose voices interweave throughout the commentary.

Woman Wisdom

The title, Wisdom Commentary, reflects both the importance to feminists of the figure of Woman Wisdom in the Scriptures and the distinct

wisdom that feminist women and men bring to the interpretive process. In the Scriptures, Woman Wisdom appears as "a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty" (Wis 7:25), who was present and active in fashioning all that exists (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 8:6). She is a spirit who pervades and penetrates all things (Wis 7:22-23), and she provides guidance and nourishment at her all-inclusive table (Prov 9:1-5). In both postexilic biblical and nonbiblical Jewish sources, Woman Wisdom is often equated with Torah, e.g., Sir 24:23-34; Bar 3:9–4:4; 38:2; 46:4-5; 2 Bar 48:33, 36; 4 Ezra 5:9-10; 13:55; 14:40; 1 Enoch 42.

The New Testament frequently portrays Jesus as Wisdom incarnate. He invites his followers, "take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matt 11:29), just as Ben Sira advises, "put your neck under her [Wisdom's] yoke and let your souls receive instruction" (Sir 51:26). Just as Wisdom experiences rejection (Prov 1:23-25; Sir 15:7-8; Wis 10:3; Bar 3:12), so too does Jesus (Mark 8:31; John 1:10-11). Only some accept his invitation to his all-inclusive banquet (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24; compare Prov 1:20-21; 9:3-5). Yet, "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Matt 11:19, speaking of Jesus and John the Baptist; in the Lucan parallel at 7:35 they are called "wisdom's children"). There are numerous parallels between what is said of Wisdom and of the *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18). These are only a few of many examples. This female embodiment of divine presence and power is an apt image to guide the work of this series.

Feminism

There are many different understandings of the term "feminism." The various meanings, aims, and methods have developed exponentially in recent decades. Feminism is a perspective and a movement that springs from a recognition of inequities toward women, and it advocates for changes in whatever structures prevent full human flourishing. Three waves of feminism in the United States are commonly recognized. The first, arising in the mid-nineteenth century and lasting into the early twentieth, was sparked by women's efforts to be involved in the public sphere and to win the right to vote. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave focused on civil rights and equality for women. With the third wave, from the 1980s forward, came global feminism and the emphasis on the contextual nature of interpretation. Now a fourth wave may be emerging, with a stronger emphasis on the intersectionality of women's concerns with those of other marginalized groups and the increased use

of the internet as a platform for discussion and activism.[1] As feminism has matured, it has recognized that inequities based on gender are interwoven with power imbalances based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability, and a host of other social markers.

Feminist Women and Men

Men who choose to identify with and partner with feminist women in the work of deconstructing systems of domination and building structures of equality are rightly regarded as feminists. Some men readily identify with experiences of women who are discriminated against on the basis of sex/gender, having themselves had comparable experiences; others who may not have faced direct discrimination or stereotyping recognize that inequity and problematic characterization still occur, and they seek correction. This series is pleased to include feminist men both as lead authors and as contributing voices.

Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Women interpreting the Bible from the lenses of their own experience is nothing new. Throughout the ages women have recounted the biblical stories, teaching them to their children and others, all the while interpreting them afresh for their time and circumstances.[2] Following is a very brief sketch of select foremothers who laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist biblical interpretation.

One of the earliest known Christian women who challenged patriarchal interpretations of Scripture was a consecrated virgin named Helie, who lived in the second century CE. When she refused to marry, her

1. See Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism" (October 25, 2015), at http://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism; and Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave.

2. For fuller treatments of this history, see chap. 7, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Bible Criticism," in Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Susanne Scholz, "From the 'Woman's Bible' to the 'Women's Bible,' The History of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible," in *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible*, IFT 13 (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 12–32; Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*: *A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

parents brought her before a judge, who quoted to her Paul's admonition, "It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:9). In response, Helie first acknowledges that this is what Scripture says, but then she retorts, "but not for everyone, that is, not for holy virgins."[3] She is one of the first to question the notion that a text has one meaning that is applicable in all situations.

A Jewish woman who also lived in the second century CE, Beruriah, is said to have had "profound knowledge of biblical exegesis and outstanding intelligence."[4] One story preserved in the Talmud (b. Berakot 10a) tells of how she challenged her husband, Rabbi Meir, when he prayed for the destruction of a sinner. Proffering an alternate interpretation, she argued that Psalm 104:35 advocated praying for the destruction of sin, not the sinner.

In medieval times the first written commentaries on Scripture from a critical feminist point of view emerge. While others may have been produced and passed on orally, they are for the most part lost to us now. Among the earliest preserved feminist writings are those of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), German writer, mystic, and abbess of a Benedictine monastery. She reinterpreted the Genesis narratives in a way that presented women and men as complementary and interdependent. She frequently wrote about feminine aspects of the Divine.[5] Along with other women mystics of the time, such as Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), she spoke authoritatively from her personal experiences of God's revelation in prayer.

In this era, women were also among the scribes who copied biblical manuscripts. Notable among them is Paula Dei Mansi of Verona, from a distinguished family of Jewish scribes. In 1288, she translated from Hebrew into Italian a collection of Bible commentaries written by her father and added her own explanations.[6]

Another pioneer, Christine de Pizan (1365–ca. 1430), was a French court writer and prolific poet. She used allegory and common sense

3. Madrid, Escorial MS, a II 9, f. 90 v., as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 140.

4. See Judith R. Baskin, "Women and Post-Biblical Commentary," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), xlix–lv, at lii.

5. Hildegard of Bingen, *De Operatione Dei*, 1.4.100; PL 197:885bc, as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 142–43. See also Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

6. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, Cheryl Tallan, eds., *JPS Guide to Jewish Women 600 B.C.E.–1900 C.E.* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), 110–11.

to subvert misogynist readings of Scripture and celebrated the accomplishments of female biblical figures to argue for women's active roles in building society.[7]

By the seventeenth century, there were women who asserted that the biblical text needs to be understood and interpreted in its historical context. For example, Rachel Speght (1597–ca. 1630), a Calvinist English poet, elaborates on the historical situation in first-century Corinth that prompted Paul to say, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). Her aim was to show that the biblical texts should not be applied in a literal fashion to all times and circumstances. Similarly, Margaret Fell (1614–1702), one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, addressed the Pauline prohibitions against women speaking in church by insisting that they do not have universal validity. Rather, they need to be understood in their historical context, as addressed to a local church in particular time-bound circumstances.[8]

Along with analyzing the historical context of the biblical writings, women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to attend to misogynistic interpretations based on faulty translations. One of the first to do so was British feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731).[9] In the United States, the Grimké sisters, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879), Quaker women from a slaveholding family in South Carolina, learned biblical Greek and Hebrew so that they could interpret the Bible for themselves. They were prompted to do so after men sought to silence them from speaking out against slavery and for women's rights by claiming that the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34) prevented women from speaking in public.[10] Another prominent abolitionist, Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), a former slave, quoted the Bible liberally in her speeches[11] and in so doing challenged cultural assumptions and biblical interpretations that undergird gender inequities.

7. See further Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 127–32.

8. Her major work, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures*, published in London in 1667, gave a systematic feminist reading of all biblical texts pertaining to women.

9. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970, reprint of the 1730 edition; earliest edition of this work is 1700), 103–4.

10. See further Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838).

11. See, for example, her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, OH; http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp.

Another monumental work that emerged in nineteenth-century England was that of Jewish theologian Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), *The Women of Israel*,[12] published in 1845. Aguilar's approach was to make connections between the biblical women and contemporary Jewish women's concerns. She aimed to counter the widespread notion that women were degraded in Jewish law and that only in Christianity were women's dignity and value upheld. Her intent was to help Jewish women find strength and encouragement by seeing the evidence of God's compassionate love in the history of every woman in the Bible. While not a full commentary on the Bible, Aguilar's work stands out for its comprehensive treatment of every female biblical character, including even the most obscure references.[13]

The first person to produce a full-blown feminist commentary on the Bible was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902). A leading proponent in the United States for women's right to vote, she found that whenever women tried to make inroads into politics, education, or the work world, the Bible was quoted against them. Along with a team of like-minded women, she produced her own commentary on every text of the Bible that concerned women. Her pioneering two-volume project, *The Woman's Bible*, published in 1895 and 1898, urges women to recognize that texts that degrade women come from the men who wrote the texts, not from God, and to use their common sense to rethink what has been presented to them as sacred.

Nearly a century later, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Westminster John Knox, 1992), appeared. This one-volume commentary features North American feminist scholarship on each book of the Protestant canon. Like Cady Stanton's commentary, it does not contain comments on every section of the biblical text but only on those passages deemed relevant to women. It was revised and expanded in 1998 to include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books, and the contributors to this new volume reflect the global face of contemporary feminist scholarship. The revisions made in the third edition, which appeared in 2012, represent the profound advances in feminist biblical scholarship and include newer voices. In both the second and third editions, *The* has been dropped from the title.

12. The full title is *The Women of Israel or Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History Illustrative of the Past History, Present Duty, and Future Destiny of the Hebrew Females, as Based on the Word of God.*

13. See further Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, xxxviii; Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 31–37.

Also appearing at the centennial of Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* were two volumes edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews. The first, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), charts a comprehensive approach to feminist interpretation from ecumenical, interreligious, and multicultural perspectives. The second volume, published in 1994, provides critical feminist commentary on each book of the New Testament as well as on three books of Jewish Pseudepigrapha and eleven other early Christian writings.

In Europe, similar endeavors have been undertaken, such as the one-volume *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), featuring German feminist biblical interpretation of each book of the Bible, along with apocryphal books, and several extrabiblical writings. This work, now in its third edition, has recently been translated into English.[14] A multivolume project, *The Bible and Women: An Encylopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, edited by Irmtraud Fischer, Adriana Valerio, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Christiana de Groot, is currently in production. This project presents a history of the reception of the Bible as embedded in Western cultural history and focuses particularly on gender-relevant biblical themes, biblical female characters, and women recipients of the Bible. The volumes are published in English, Spanish, Italian, and German.[15]

Another groundbreaking work is the collection The Feminist Companion to the Bible Series, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–2015), which comprises twenty volumes of commentaries on the Old Testament. The parallel series, Feminist Companion

14. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). Another notable collection is the three volumes edited by Susanne Scholz, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, Recent Research in Biblical Studies 7, 8, 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013, 2014, 2016).

15. The first volume, on the Torah, appeared in Spanish in 2009, in German and Italian in 2010, and in English in 2011 (Atlanta, GA: SBL). Four more volumes are now available: *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2014); *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Calduch-Benages (2014); *Gospels: Narrative and History*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Marinella Perroni (2015); and *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (2015). For further information, see http://www.bibleandwomen.org.

to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff and Maria Mayo Robbins (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001–2009), contains thirteen volumes with one more planned. These two series are not full commentaries on the biblical books but comprise collected essays on discrete biblical texts.

Works by individual feminist biblical scholars in all parts of the world abound, and they are now too numerous to list in this introduction. Feminist biblical interpretation has reached a level of maturity that now makes possible a commentary series on every book of the Bible. In recent decades, women have had greater access to formal theological education, have been able to learn critical analytical tools, have put their own interpretations into writing, and have developed new methods of biblical interpretation. Until recent decades the work of feminist biblical interpreters was largely unknown, both to other women and to their brothers in the synagogue, church, and academy. Feminists now have taken their place in the professional world of biblical scholars, where they build on the work of their foremothers and connect with one another across the globe in ways not previously possible. In a few short decades, feminist biblical criticism has become an integral part of the academy.

Methodologies

Feminist biblical scholars use a variety of methods and often employ a number of them together.[16] In the Wisdom Commentary series, the authors will explain their understanding of feminism and the feminist reading strategies used in their commentary. Each volume treats the biblical text in blocks of material, not an analysis verse by verse. The entire text is considered, not only those passages that feature female characters or that speak specifically about women. When women are not apparent in the narrative, feminist lenses are used to analyze the dynamics in the text between male characters, the models of power, binary ways of thinking, and dynamics of imperialism. Attention is given to how the whole text functions and how it was and is heard, both in its original context and today. Issues of particular concern to women—e.g., poverty, food, health, the environment, water—come to the fore.

16. See the seventeen essays in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, eds., *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2005), which show the complementarity of various approaches.

One of the approaches used by early feminists and still popular today is to lift up the overlooked and forgotten stories of women in the Bible. Studies of women in each of the Testaments have been done, and there are also studies on women in particular biblical books.[17] Feminists recognize that the examples of biblical characters can be both empowering and problematic. The point of the feminist enterprise is not to serve as an apologetic for women; it is rather, in part, to recover women's history and literary roles in all their complexity and to learn from that recovery.

Retrieving the submerged history of biblical women is a crucial step for constructing the story of the past so as to lead to liberative possibilities for the present and future. There are, however, some pitfalls to this approach. Sometimes depictions of biblical women have been naïve and romantic. Some commentators exalt the virtues of both biblical and contemporary women and paint women as superior to men. Such reverse discrimination inhibits movement toward equality for all. In addition, some feminists challenge the idea that one can "pluck positive images out of an admittedly androcentric text, separating literary characterizations from the androcentric interests they were created to serve."[18] Still other feminists find these images to have enormous value.

One other danger with seeking the submerged history of women is the tendency for Christian feminists to paint Jesus and even Paul as liberators of women in a way that demonizes Judaism.[19] Wisdom Commentary aims to enhance understanding of Jesus as well as Paul as Jews of their day and to forge solidarity among Jewish and Christian feminists.

17. See, e.g., Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002); Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*, Companions to the New Testament (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

18. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, FCB 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 75–97, at 76.

19. See Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1:117–29; Amy-Jill Levine, "The New Testament and Anti-Judaism," in *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 87–117.

Feminist scholars who use historical-critical methods analyze the world behind the text; they seek to understand the historical context from which the text emerged and the circumstances of the communities to whom it was addressed. In bringing feminist lenses to this approach, the aim is not to impose modern expectations on ancient cultures but to unmask the ways that ideologically problematic mind-sets that produced the ancient texts are still promulgated through the text. Feminist biblical scholars aim not only to deconstruct but also to reclaim and reconstruct biblical history as women's history, in which women were central and active agents in creating religious heritage.[20] A further step is to construct meaning for contemporary women and men in a liberative movement toward transformation of social, political, economic, and religious structures.[21] In recent years, some feminists have embraced new historicism, which accents the creative role of the interpreter in any construction of history and exposes the power struggles to which the text witnesses.[22]

Literary critics analyze the world of the text: its form, language patterns, and rhetorical function.[23] They do not attempt to separate layers of tradition and redaction but focus on the text holistically, as it is in

20. See, for example, Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

21. See, e.g., Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), whose aim is to engage in biblical interpretation not only for intellectual enlightenment but, even more important, for personal and communal transformation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001]) envisions the work of feminist biblical interpretation as a dance of Wisdom that consists of seven steps that interweave in spiral movements toward liberation, the final one being transformative action for change.

22. See Gina Hens Piazza, *The New Historicism*, GBS, Old Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

23. Phyllis Trible was among the first to employ this method with texts from Genesis and Ruth in her groundbreaking book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). Another pioneer in feminist literary criticism is Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]). For surveys of recent developments in literary methods, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

its present form. They examine how meaning is created in the interaction between the text and its reader in multiple contexts. Within the arena of literary approaches are reader-oriented approaches, narrative, rhetorical, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, ideological, autobiographical, and performance criticism.[24] Narrative critics study the interrelation among author, text, and audience through investigation of settings, both spatial and temporal; characters; plot; and narrative techniques (e.g., irony, parody, intertextual allusions). Reader-response critics attend to the impact that the text has on the reader or hearer. They recognize that when a text is detrimental toward women there is the choice either to affirm the text or to read against the grain toward a liberative end. Rhetorical criticism analyzes the style of argumentation and attends to how the author is attempting to shape the thinking or actions of the hearer. Structuralist critics analyze the complex patterns of binary oppositions in the text to derive its meaning.[25] Post-structuralist approaches challenge the notion that there are fixed meanings to any biblical text or that there is one universal truth. They engage in close readings of the text and often engage in intertextual analysis.[26] Within this approach is deconstructionist criticism, which views the text as a site of conflict, with competing narratives. The interpreter aims to expose the fault lines and overturn and reconfigure binaries by elevating the underling of a pair and foregrounding it.[27] Feminists also use other postmodern approaches, such as ideological and autobiographical criticism. The former analyzes the system of ideas that underlies the power and

24. See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

25. See, e.g., David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield University, 1978).

26. See, e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2010); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

27. David Penchansky, "Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–205. See, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, BibInt 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

values concealed in the text as well as that of the interpreter.[28] The latter involves deliberate self-disclosure while reading the text as a critical exegete.[29] Performance criticism attends to how the text was passed on orally, usually in communal settings, and to the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the performer and the audience.[30]

From the beginning, feminists have understood that interpreting the Bible is an act of power. In recent decades, feminist biblical scholars have developed hermeneutical theories of the ethics and politics of biblical interpretation to challenge the claims to value neutrality of most academic biblical scholarship. Feminist biblical scholars have also turned their attention to how some biblical writings were shaped by the power of empire and how this still shapes readers' self-understandings today. They have developed hermeneutical approaches that reveal, critique, and evaluate the interactions depicted in the text against the context of empire, and they consider implications for contemporary contexts.[31] Feminists also analyze the dynamics of colonization and the mentalities of colonized peoples in the exercise of biblical interpretation. As Kwok Pui-lan explains, "A postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible needs to investigate the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the colonizers and the colonized, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres where these elites could exercise control."[32] Methods and models from sociology and cultural anthropology are used by feminists to investigate

28. See Tina Pippin, ed., *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts: Semeia* 59 (1992); Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007).

29. See, e.g., Ingrid Rose Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Interpretation: Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002); P. J. W. Schutte, "When *They*, *We*, and the Passive Become *I*—Introducing Autobiographical Biblical Criticism," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 61 (2005): 401–16.

30. See, e.g., Holly Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

31. E.g., Gale Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Warren Carter, *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London: T & T Clark, 2005); *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004).

32. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 9. See also, Musa W. Dube, ed., *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000); Cristl M. Maier and

women's everyday lives, their experiences of marriage, childrearing, labor, money, illness, etc.[33]

As feminists have examined the construction of gender from varying cultural perspectives, they have become ever more cognizant that the way gender roles are defined within differing cultures varies radically. As Mary Ann Tolbert observes, "Attempts to isolate some universal role that cross-culturally defines 'woman' have run into contradictory evidence at every turn."[34] Some women have coined new terms to highlight the particularities of their socio-cultural context. Many African American feminists, for example, call themselves *womanists* to draw attention to the double oppression of racism and sexism they experience.[35] Similarly, many US Hispanic feminists speak of themselves as *mujeristas* (*mujer* is Spanish for "woman").[36] Others prefer to be called "Latina feminists."[37] Both groups emphasize that the context for their theologizing is *mestizaje* and *mulatez* (racial and cultural mixture), done *en conjunto* (in community), with *lo cotidiano* (everyday lived experience) of Hispanic women as starting points for theological reflection and the encounter with the divine. Intercultural analysis has become an indispensable tool for working toward justice for women at the global level.[38]

Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

33. See, for example, Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Susan Niditch, *"My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

34. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:255–71, at 265.

35. Alice Walker coined the term (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967, 1983]). See also Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 30–40; Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988); Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

36. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (*Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996]) is credited with coining the term.

37. E.g., María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

38. See, e.g., María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, Studies in Latino/a Catholicism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

Some feminists are among those who have developed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) interpretation. This approach focuses on issues of sexual identity and uses various reading strategies. Some point out the ways in which categories that emerged in recent centuries are applied anachronistically to biblical texts to make modern-day judgments. Others show how the Bible is silent on contemporary issues about sexual identity. Still others examine same-sex relationships in the Bible by figures such as Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan. In recent years, queer theory has emerged; it emphasizes the blurriness of boundaries not just of sexual identity but also of gender roles. Queer critics often focus on texts in which figures transgress what is traditionally considered proper gender behavior.[39]

Feminists also recognize that the struggle for women's equality and dignity is intimately connected with the struggle for respect for Earth and for the whole of the cosmos. Ecofeminists interpret Scripture in ways that highlight the link between human domination of nature and male subjugation of women. They show how anthropocentric ways of interpreting the Bible have overlooked or dismissed Earth and Earth community. They invite readers to identify not only with human characters in the biblical narrative but also with other Earth creatures and domains of nature, especially those that are the object of injustice. Some use creative imagination to retrieve the interests of Earth implicit in the narrative and enable Earth to speak.[40]

Biblical Authority

By the late nineteenth century, some feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to question openly whether the Bible could continue to be regarded as authoritative for women. They viewed the Bible itself as

39. See, e.g., Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *JFSR* 6 (1990): 65–86; Deirdre J. Good, "Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations," *Theology and Sexuality* 7 (1997): 70–82; Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Feminist Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2011); Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, eds., *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2011).

40. E.g., Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, SymS 46 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America*, Women from the Margins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

the source of women's oppression, and some rejected its sacred origin and saving claims. Some decided that the Bible and the religious traditions that enshrine it are too thoroughly saturated with androcentrism and patriarchy to be redeemable.[41]

In the Wisdom Commentary series, questions such as these may be raised, but the aim of this series is not to lead readers to reject the authority of the biblical text. Rather, the aim is to promote better understanding of the contexts from which the text arose and of the rhetorical effects it has on women and men in contemporary contexts. Such understanding can lead to a deepening of faith, with the Bible serving as an aid to bring flourishing of life.

Language for God

Because of the ways in which the term "God" has been used to symbolize the divine in predominantly male, patriarchal, and monarchical modes, feminists have designed new ways of speaking of the divine. Some have called attention to the inadequacy of the term *God* by trying to visually destabilize our ways of thinking and speaking of the divine. Rosemary Radford Ruether proposed *God/ess*, as an unpronounceable term pointing to the unnameable understanding of the divine that transcends patriarchal limitations.[42] Some have followed traditional Jewish practice, writing *G-d.* Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has adopted *G*d*.[43] Others draw on the biblical tradition to mine female and non-gender-specific metaphors and symbols.[44] In Wisdom Commentary, there is not one standard way of expressing the divine; each author will use her or his preferred ways. The one exception is that when the tetragrammaton, YHWH, the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, is used, it will be without vowels, respecting the Jewish custom of avoiding pronouncing the divine name out of reverence.

41. E.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: A Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

42. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

43. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 191 n. 3. See above xiv n. 3.

44. E.g., Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). See further Elizabeth A. Johnson, "God," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 128–30.

Nomenclature for the Two Testaments

In recent decades, some biblical scholars have begun to call the two Testaments of the Bible by names other than the traditional nomenclature: Old and New Testament. Some regard "Old" as derogatory, implying that it is no longer relevant or that it has been superseded. Consequently, terms like Hebrew Bible, First Testament, and Jewish Scriptures and, correspondingly, Christian Scriptures or Second Testament have come into use. There are a number of difficulties with these designations. The term "Hebrew Bible" does not take into account that parts of the Old Testament are written not in Hebrew but in Aramaic.[45] Moreover, for Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Old Testament includes books written in Greek—the Deuterocanonical books, considered Apocrypha by Protestants. The term "Jewish Scriptures" is inadequate because these books are also sacred to Christians. Conversely, "Christian Scriptures" is not an accurate designation for the New Testament, since the Old Testament is also part of the Christian Scriptures. Using "First and Second Testament" also has difficulties, in that it can imply a hierarchy and a value judgment.[46] Jews generally use the term Tanakh, an acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

In Wisdom Commentary, if authors choose to use a designation other than Tanakh, Old Testament, and New Testament, they will explain how they mean the term.

Translation

Modern feminist scholars recognize the complexities connected with biblical translation, as they have delved into questions about philosophy of language, how meanings are produced, and how they are culturally situated. Today it is evident that simply translating into gender-neutral formulations cannot address all the challenges presented by androcentric texts. Efforts at feminist translation must also deal with issues around authority and canonicity.[47]

Because of these complexities, the editors of Wisdom Commentary series have chosen to use an existing translation, the New Revised Standard

45. Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Ezra 4:7–6:18; 7:12-26; Dan 2:4–7:28.

46. See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 193–99.

47. Elizabeth Castelli, "*Les Belles Infidèles*/Fidelity or Feminism? The Meanings of Feminist Biblical Translation," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:189–204, here 190.

Version (NRSV), which is provided for easy reference at the top of each page of commentary. The NRSV was produced by a team of ecumenical and interreligious scholars, is a fairly literal translation, and uses inclusive language for human beings. Brief discussions about problematic translations appear in the inserts labeled "Translation Matters." When more detailed discussions are available, these will be indicated in footnotes. In the commentary, wherever Hebrew or Greek words are used, English translation is provided. In cases where a wordplay is involved, transliteration is provided to enable understanding.

Art and Poetry

Artistic expression in poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and various other modes is very important to feminist interpretation. Where possible, art and poetry are included in the print volumes of the series. In a number of instances, these are original works created for this project. Regrettably, copyright and production costs prohibit the inclusion of color photographs and other artistic work. It is our hope that the web version will allow a greater collection of such resources.

Glossary

Because there are a number of excellent readily available resources that provide definitions and concise explanations of terms used in feminist theological and biblical studies, this series will not include a glossary. We refer you to works such as *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell with J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), and volume 1 of *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Individual authors in the Wisdom Commentary series will define the way they are using terms that may be unfamiliar.

Bibliography

Because bibliographies are quickly outdated and because the space is limited, only a list of Works Cited is included in the print volumes. A comprehensive bibliography for each volume is posted on a dedicated website and is updated regularly. The link for this volume can be found at wisdomcommentary.org.

A Concluding Word

In just a few short decades, feminist biblical studies has grown exponentially, both in the methods that have been developed and in the number of scholars who have embraced it. We realize that this series is limited and will soon need to be revised and updated. It is our hope that Wisdom Commentary, by making the best of current feminist biblical scholarship available in an accessible format to ministers, preachers, teachers, scholars, and students, will aid all readers in their advancement toward God's vision of dignity, equality, and justice for all.

Acknowledgments

There are a great many people who have made this series possible: first, Peter Dwyer, director, and Hans Christoffersen, publisher of the academic market at Liturgical Press, who have believed in this project and have shepherded it since it was conceived in 2008. Editorial consultants Athalya Brenner-Idan and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have not only been an inspiration with their pioneering work but have encouraged us all along the way with their personal involvement. Volume editors Mary Ann Beavis, Carol J. Dempsey, Amy-Jill Levine, Linda M. Maloney, Ahida Pilarski, Sarah Tanzer, Lauress Wilkins Lawrence, and Seung Ai Yang have lent their extraordinary wisdom to the shaping of the series, have used their extensive networks of relationships to secure authors and contributors, and have worked tirelessly to guide their work to completion. Two others who contributed greatly to the shaping of the project at the outset were Linda M. Day and Mignon Jacobs, as well as Barbara E. Bowe of blessed memory (d. 2010). Editorial and research assistant Susan M. Hickman has provided invaluable support with administrative details and arrangements. I am grateful to Brian Eisenschenk and Christine Henderson who have assisted Susan Hickman with the Wiki. There are countless others at Liturgical Press whose daily work makes the production possible. I am especially thankful to Lauren L. Murphy, Andrea Humphrey, and Justin Howell for their work in copyediting.

Author's Introduction to Philippians

A Political Ideological Feminist Reading

The focus of this discussion of the Letter of Paul to the Philippians is hermeneutical, written from a specific political-ideological and feminist perspective. This feminist approach follows Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in that feminism is not reduced to the subject of women but encompasses the struggle against the kyriarchal[1] system that involves all systemic forms of discrimination. With a desire to see females as subjects who affirm themselves as such, independent of the man-woman relationship, this analysis of the letter is conducted, when possible, outside of the man-woman and female-male binaries, which is to say, outside of theories of equality and difference. This approach is not meant to devalue the excellent contributions of feminist theorists that have been made and continue to be made. But in this commentary, I want to see females as subjects with an autonomy that

1. A word used by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). In *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), she defines it as a neologism "derived from the Greek words for 'lord' or 'master' (*kyrios*) and 'to rule or dominate' (*archein*) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination" (211).

has been acquired because of their commitment to the movement of the Resurrected One, independent of their sex and gender. In other words, I wish to see women's participation simply as persons. The letter to the Philippians lends itself to a political-ideological reading.

Such a reading of Philippians implies a creative use of language. Therefore, I speak of the movement of the Resurrected One, of the companions of the movement in Philippi, of Paul as a political prisoner because of the Gospel for which he and others struggled, of tendencies and divisions within the movement, of unity and strength in resistance, of ethics, of justice and care, and of economic problems, among other things. Because this letter comes from a prisoner who is awaiting a possible death sentence, the discussion addresses questions related to censorship, the Roman secret police, the defense trial before the court, and the implications of writing or receiving letters from prison. In this respect, Angela Standhartinger's contributions reflect on the tone of the letter,[2] as do those of Craig S. Wansink[3] and Richard Cassidy.[4] Taking into account that the document is a writing from prison and analyzing it from a political-religious and feminist perspective using new language helps to re-create the letter as if it were a new document. In this analysis I have endeavored to utilize non-patriarchal, inclusive language, which helps readers to see the contents of the letter with different eyes. Of course, to speak of the Divine instead of God or Father not only goes beyond androcentrism and the paternal household but renews the message of the letter.

I do not underestimate the dissonant voices of Joseph Marchal in seeing the letter as rhetorical kyriarchal and imperialist speech,[5] especially his critique of the rhetoric of imitation, which Elizabeth A. Castelli deconstructed in the 1990s.[6] But I believe that when the discourse is read

2. Angela Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt eines Gefangenen: Die Kommunikationsstruktur des Philipperbriefs im Spiegel seiner Abfassungssituation," *NovT* 55 (2013): 140–67.

3. Craig S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ*: *The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*, JSNTSup 130 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996).

4. Richard Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

5. Joseph A. Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender, and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); *Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

6. Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Nashville, TN: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

from the point of view of a prisoner awaiting a death sentence, other elements come into play that mitigate the readings of Marchal and Castelli. I work within the framework of the biblical scholars of the Latin American Biblical Interpretation Review (RIBLA),[7] as well as that of the biblical scholars of the Western world such as Richard Horsley, Brigitte Kahl, Neil Elliott, Warren Carter, Davina C. López, and others.[8] I opt for seeing in Paul's writing a subversive praxis and critical discourse against the Roman Empire. Additionally, I believe that rediscovering liberating aspects in Philippians, such as Paul's presumption of equality with the women from Philippi, empowers women and questions church readings that seek to impose the subordination of women using Paul's letters.

The Rhetorical Situation

In order to give coherence to the discourse of the letter, I visualize its socio-political religious background as its rhetorical context, which I deduce by taking into account the data of the investigation and the implications of documents written by and about the prisoners that I present below. The author of Philippians is a prisoner because he belongs to a social-religious movement that proposes a different way of being and living in the context of the Roman Empire. The founder of the movement is Jesus of Nazareth, the human face of the Divine; his life, manifested in actions and teachings, inevitably led to his arrest and later his crucifixion. But because the Divine vindicated him by raising him from the dead, the movement continued. Therefore, I call this movement the movement of the Resurrected One. The Resurrected One is called Lord and Savior in contrast to Caesar, who claimed himself to be the absolute ruler and demanded submission symbolically represented in the cult of Caesar in all the provinces. In the movement of the Resurrected One,

7. E.g., Milton Schwantes, Carlos Mesters, Severino Croato, Nancy Cardoso, Ivoni Richter Reimer, Cristina Conti, Irene Foulkes, Mercedes López, Néstor Míguez, Pablo Richard, René Krüger, Jorge Pixley, Tirsa Ventura, Silvia Regina Silva, Maricel Mena, Gonzalo de la Torre, and many others.

8. See Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Reimagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); Davina C. López, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); and others.

women and slaves all participated actively because in standing before the Divine there are no differences of gender, ethnicity, or class (Gal 3:28). An example of the significant participation of women in the movement is that they are in the Roman colony of Philippi, a community in which women were possibly the majority and therefore had leadership roles (see Acts 16:13-15).

This movement is not a structured organization or a political party connected with a particular ideology but a small and insignificant movement that gathers the aspirations of women and men who are tired of living within a system that is unjust and discriminatory. That is why they speak of the struggle for justice and the practice of mutual care. It is in this context that members of this movement in Philippi receive a letter from a political prisoner named Paul. He is one of the leaders of the movement of the Resurrected One and was put in prison for proclaiming values contrary to those of Roman imperial society. Together with him, striving in the same movement, are the Philippian women, including leaders such as Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2).

There are three groups that oppose the ideals of the movement in which Paul and the community in Philippi participate. The first is Roman society, called "crooked and perverse" (Phil 2:15) for following values that are not in accord with the cause of the Resurrected One. The second group has spread rumors within the movement to distance themselves from Paul because of the extreme way he proclaims his principles, which led to his imprisonment (1:17). The third is a group of Jews within the movement who differ from Paul even more than the second group because of the way they understand salvation and its requirements (3:1). The companions at Philippi have to be careful of the first and third groups. The second group is found in the city where Paul is prisoner.

The recipients of the letter in Philippi are also having difficulties. The Roman police are probably watching them and/or the people who live around them are hostile to them because they belong to a movement whose proclamations are considered harmful. This sector opposes (ἀντικειμένων) them, tries to intimidate them (Phil 1:28), and makes them concerned and worried (4:6). The recipients of the letter also had economic problems.[9] Nevertheless, knowing that their companion Paul was imprisoned and dependent on friends and family to survive, they sent

9. Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 77–99.

him economic help. It is worth noting that it is the Philippian community, the farthest away from the prison, that gives him financial help, not the people of the movement in the city where Paul is prisoner. They also sent Epaphroditus to support Paul, and Paul returned him to them with his letter. Timothy will later visit the companions in Philippi; it seems that they had wanted Timothy to come sooner, but his presence and support for Paul were essential as he prepared his defense for the courts (2:19-24).

We can observe a certain tension within the movement. Two strong leaders, Euodia and Syntyche, have unnamed differences (Phil 3:3). In his letter, Paul asks them to be of the same mind and reiterates his exhortation to unity and to remain firm because of the situation of uncertainty and persecution that could easily occur.

Paul does not say much about his suffering in prison. Therefore, understanding his physical and emotional situation requires reading between the lines and visualizing the prison. According to my research, Paul is under military custody (*custodia militaris*), which allows him to have visitors such as Timothy and Epaphroditus and to receive money. Paul is in a continually uncomfortable physical position because he is always chained to one or two soldiers, either with his arms and hands or feet (*manacles* or *pedicles*). He would have dictated the letter or paid a soldier to unchain him enough to write the letter himself. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks of the imperial guard. If he is in Ephesus, he would be within the governor's palace. Prisons were not necessarily buildings constructed exclusively for prisoners; any building could function as a prison for someone. Paul's emotional and psychological situation is indicated by three signs in the letter: his strength in weakness (1:4, 12-14, 16-17, 18b-20; 2:6-11, 18; 3:4-10, 20-21; 4:10a, 11-13, 18); his uncertainty about his sentence (1:21-25; 2:17; 3:10-11); and his worries about his readers struggling to cope with his absence and the hostility around them (1:7-11, 27-30; 2:2-5; 23-24; 3:1; 4:1, 2-3, 4, 6-7). Besides those concerns, Paul was probably hungry, but Phil 4:12 shows that he had learned the secret (μεμύημαι) of going hungry and having enough. His experience has taught him to be content with whatever he has (4:11).

One problem prisoners have is what to do with time and the uncertainty of what will happen after the verdict. Paul is in this situation of uncertainty; he doesn't know whether he will be condemned to death or freed. He seems confident that he will be set free because of the prayers on his behalf (Phil 1:19). He seems confident, but he doesn't say anything so as not to worry the readers, in case he is not granted freedom (see 1:25, 26). Even though Paul longs to be with Christ, he prefers to be free from death so that

he can help the community in Philippi (1:22). In repeating the possibility of a death sentence, however, he shows his strength, and it seems that he is preparing himself; he says, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (1:21; 2:17). The prisoner Paul speaks a lot about joy, repeating the word and its derivatives sixteen times in the letter. Speaking of joy is common among prisoners, both to strengthen themselves psychologically and to avoid worrying their companions, in this case, Paul's supporters in the movement in Philippi. Nevertheless, I imagine that sadness is not absent for Paul, as indicated by his desire to "be with Christ" (1:23).

Analyzing Philippians from the perspective of Paul's suffering and uncertainty in prison helps us to better understand his theology. In addition, it clarifies phrases and words and points to missing information that reveals strategies used by prisoners subject to censorship. Therefore, all study of the letter to the Philippians should take very seriously the conditions of its chained author. Paul was imprisoned for his ideas, not because he was a debtor or a criminal. He writes in the manner of what we could call today a "political prisoner." Philippians is not a friendly, inoffensive letter. It is a document that reflects sorrow and, at the same time, strength in a person deprived of freedom and living on the line between life and death. As Robin Scroggs writes,

> The Apostle . . . has been arrested by a Roman official on some charge—which would have been brought against him by private citizens and whose successful prosecution carried a penalty of death. At the time he writes the letter, Paul does not know what the result of the trial will be. The desperate ambiguity of life or death explicitly permeates the first section of the letter and must infiltrate every topic Paul addresses; however, some commentators seem to think Paul was on a Sunday outing while he wrote.[10]

For all these reasons, I call Paul "the prisoner" throughout my commentary as a constant reminder that he writes in shackles.

The Relationship of the Prisoner with His Recipients

In this analysis, I emphasize that women were the primary recipients of the letter because, as noted above, it is very likely that the followers

10. Robin Scroggs, "Paul the Prisoner: Political Asceticism in the Letter to the Philippians," in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 187.

of the Resurrected One in Philippi were mostly women and were led by women. We know that in Philippi, Paul and Silas went first to women and that most likely Lydia was one of the founders and thus a leader of the community (Acts 16:11-24, 40). The letter also mentions by name two other great leaders and fighters for the gospel: Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2-3). Therefore, in order to call the attention of my readers to the specific recipients of this letter, I have opted to transgress androcentric linguistic norms by giving grammatical privilege to the feminine gender. I also assume that Paul had in mind the women leaders in Philippi when he wrote the letter. I am not the first to see the Philippian leaders as women. Lilian Portefaix uses literary reception theory to reveal that women are the primary recipients of the letter.[11] It is clear that her objective is different from mine: she is interested in reconstructing first-century women's religious and cultural backgrounds in order to deduce their comprehension of Paul's message. She, like the majority of commentators, does not note, however, that the letter is a document written from prison, a setting with implications that must be taken into account.

Therefore, the hermeneutical approach of this commentary is to analyze the discourse of the letter to the Philippians as a document written from a prison in Roman imperial times; it is a letter sent to a primarily female community committed to the movement of the Resurrected One, where the majority of members are women who must struggle and run the same risks in receiving the letter as its writer did in writing it. They had already seen Paul chained in prison, since, before writing the letter to the Philippians, Paul had already suffered jail in Philippi along with Silas. According to Acts,[12] Paul and Silas had been jailed for speaking about a gospel that condemned the practices of exploitive merchants. The basic issue in the case against Paul and Silas was the exorcism of a "spirit of divination" from a slave girl, which meant that her owners could no longer use her powers to earn money for themselves (Acts 16:19). But the argument the owners made before the magistrates was that "these men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe" (16:20-21). Because the crowd began attacking the missionaries, the magistrate ordered the authorities to rip off their clothes, torture them with whips, and then jail

11. Lilian Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice: Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as Seen by First-Century Philippian Women*, ConBNT 20 (Uppsala, NY: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988).

12. I read Luke as a literary text with some useful information regarding prisoners.

and chain them with their feet in stocks in an inner cell, the most terrible place in the jail (16:22-24).

The experience would have been terrifying for the members of the movement in Philippi, above all Lydia, the leader who had opened her house to Paul (Acts 16:15). They surely remembered Paul's suffering in the Philippian jail when they heard of his new arrest in another city. They would read between the lines of Paul's letter to see that Paul was awaiting the death penalty (Phil 1:20) and that he was worried for them, not only because he knew that they were concerned about him, but because they and others in the movement were being intimidated by members of Roman imperial society (1:28).

The prisoner Paul was not exempt from acting within the parameters of patriarchy. As we know, patriarchy was the common manner in which power was exercised in the relationship between the genders, and Paul moved within this patriarchal culture.[13] Even so, in my analysis of the letter, I note some instances in which elements of equality stand out, and I question others who have implied otherwise. As noted before, in the study of the letter's language, I distance myself from the masculine-feminine binary in order to underline women's autonomy and self-affirmation, which was made possible by the movement of the Resurrected One. My reading is oriented toward empowering modern women and men readers of Philippians who are committed to solidarity and proclaim and practice countercultural values in an imperial, kyriarchal society.

Methodological Procedures

For my analysis, besides the relevant literature on Philippians, I consulted several sources that examine prisons, prisoners, and their writings from the Roman Empire. At the same time, I integrate contributions from Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barthes, and Severino Croato on the wider meanings they offer the texts through a polysemic approach.[14] I also take into account contemporary writings and voices of men and women who, oriented by their religious faith, have been imprisoned for a political cause. These include Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned from 1943 until his execution in

13. See Marchal, *Hierarchy*.

14. Paul Ricoeur, *Teoría de la Interpretación: Discurso y excedente de sentido*, trans. Graciela Mones Nicolau (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1999); Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Nicolás Rosa (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1980), 1–8; Severino Croato, *Liberación y Libertad: Pautas hermenéuticas* (Lima: CEP, 1987).

1945[15] as a member of the resistance against the dictator Hitler; Nelson Mandela, imprisoned from 1964 until 1990 in South Africa,[16] as an activist against white colonial apartheid; Frei Betto (Carlos Alberto Libanio Cristo),[17] a Dominican friar imprisoned from 1969 until 1973 for his resistance against the dictatorship in Brazil; Karl Gaspar[18] of the Order of the Redemptorists, imprisoned during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines; Etty Hillesum,[19] a young Jewish woman who wrote letters from a concentration camp in the Netherlands during the German occupation of World War II; Carmiña Navia Velasco,[20] a Colombian feminist writer who was kidnapped and held for ransom for twelve days in 1994 by the Colombian guerrilla force ELN;[21] and Neila Serrano de Barragán,[22] a Colombian doctor and Christian leader who was imprisoned by the Colombian government from 1993 to 1995 for paying a ransom to obtain the release of her husband kidnapped by the guerrilla organization M19.[23]

The voices of contemporary prisoners contribute meaning, as the French semiologist Roland Barthes has pointed out; the reader should be a producer of meaning in the text and not just a consumer of meanings already formulated. Based on this concept, I privilege in my analysis meaning that emanates from Philippians in relation to contemporary writings as well as biblical texts. "Interpretation" as Barthes defines it is a tool used as a "means of access to the multivalent meanings of the text."[24] It is a characteristic that has power to refer to earlier, later, or

15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistencia y sumisión: Cartas y apuntes desde el cautiverio*, trans. Constantino Ruiz-Garrido (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2008), 17.

16. Nelson Mandela Foundation, *A Prisoner in the Garden*: *Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive*, 1964 (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2005).

17. Frei Betto, *Cartas da prisão 1967–1973* (Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 2008).

18. Karl Gaspar, *How Long? Prison Reflections of Karl Gaspar*, ed. Helen Graham and Breda Noonan (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1985).

19. Etty Hillesum, *El corazón pensante de los barracones: Cartas* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2001).

20. Carmiña Navia Velasco, "Unidad en un sueño común: A propósito de la carta de Pablo a las mujeres de la iglesia de Filipos," letter to author, Cali, Colombia, March 30, 2014.

21. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) is a guerrilla organization that currently operates in the countryside.

22. Neila Serrano, "Mi experiencia en la cárcel a la luz de Filipenses," interview with the author, Medellín, Colombia, September 2013.

23. The M19 was an urban guerrilla until 1990. It was called M19 (19 Movement) because on April 19 they became known.

24. Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

external meanings, as well as to other locations of the text or to other texts.[25] In this way, interpretation implies taking seriously the plurality of meaning inherent in the text. Therefore, my analysis takes into account not only intratextuality (echoes or reminiscences within a single text) but also intertextuality (echoes or memories of other texts). Thus, I venture into current theories of intertextuality that focus on networks of texts and literature in a transversal, intercultural dynamic without regard to time, space, or circumstances. According to the Spanish author Jesús Camarero, this polysemic approach is an advance in the discipline of Comparative Literature. For him, "The theory of a text network is a global system of understanding and interpretation of literature with all texts included. . . . This is a step toward a comparative literary hermeneutic; in that the human subject reader would be able to take on the interpretation of a large whole or networks of related works . . . or to create relationships between them based on their own interpretation."[26]

In this way, the network of texts can be converted into a relationship among distinct works and become "a text of texts, a culture of cultures, and a language of languages, and its function would no longer be based on an invention of an original and unique history, but on a textual interaction or the capacity of relationship among different texts."[27]

Therefore, when we read the prisoner Paul's letter, we also listen to the voices of other prisoners throughout time. For this reason, then, the voices I privilege as coauthors in this commentary are the voices of political prisoners, both women and men.

Because the issues of the literary integrity of Philippians and its place of composition are two questions still discussed today, I set them aside in order to concentrate instead on the final redaction. The final version of the Philippians letter does not mention the city where Paul's prison is located; it simply says that he is a prisoner.[28] Therefore the most important aspect of the analysis of Philippians is Paul's particular space in chains because prison becomes a theological location from which the

25. Ibid.

26. Jesús Camarero, *Intertextualidad: Redes de textos y literaturas transversales en dinámica intercultural*, Pensamiento Crítico (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2008), 8.

27. Ibid., 10.

28. There is no agreement regarding the place of composition of the letter. The proposals are usually Rome and Ephesus. Rome is the traditional location according to Acts of the Apostles. Ephesus is the other proposal due to its proximity to Philippi and the possible multiple correspondence.

prisoner lays out his christological understanding and offers practical advice to his recipients. Below, I speak of the implications of being in and writing from a prison. The companions in Philippi had heard of Paul's chains and had sent help with Epaphroditus; they were worried, hoping for news of their chained companion.

Prisons in Antiquity

Various contemporary authors have done excellent analyses of the situation of ancient prisons and prisoners.[29] If in fact there is little archeological evidence of prisons in antiquity, there are sufficient sources that concur in describing jails as small spaces packed with prisoners, without much air, very dark and filthy, and posing a danger to prisoners' health—a place where sickness and disease abounded.[30]

Prisoners suffered greatly. Besides living in poor conditions, they were physically tortured with beatings and whippings along with mental torture such as insults and threats. To be chained was not rare. The case of Antiphilus is mentioned frequently, although he is a character of Lucian's novel *Taxaris*.[31] Antiphilus was forced to sleep on the floor; at night chains were put on his feet, and during the day an iron collar was placed around his neck and manacles were placed on his arms or hands. The difficulty of sleeping in chains was due not only to the discomfort but also to the clanking of the iron chains as prisoners tossed and turned.[32] In some cases, conditions were so terrible that dying seemed more dignified to the prisoner and his supporters. According to research by Wansink and Cassidy, many Romans preferred suicide to living through the humiliation of prison.[33] While there is little data about the number of prisoners or the size of prisons during the Roman Empire, one source speaks of a space where nine mattresses were used by fifty prisoners.[34] Other sources speak of the liberation of 248 male and 48 female prisoners from a single prison.[35]

29. See Wansink, *Chained in Christ*; Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt"; Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*.

30. Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 33–40.

31. Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt," 147; Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 46–47.

32. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 36.

33. Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 58–61; Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 46.

34. See Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 38. This deals with the story of Diodorus's account of the prisoner Perseus in the Alba Fucens prison (Diodorus, *Library of History* 31.9.1–14).

35. Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 37.

The studies of Wansink are very revealing. There were no individual cells in Roman prisons, so that all the prisoners were together in chains in the same space. There was, nevertheless, an interior room called a Tullianum located in the lowest part of the prison; it was said to be the darkest and most distressing place in the prison. Prisoners were sent there for more intense punishment, to prevent escape, and other reasons.[36] According to Acts, Paul was put in the Tullianum (Acts 16). Pionius, one of the Christian martyrs, was sent into the Tullianum cell for failing to pay a bribe.[37] According to the Roman historian Sallustio (83–35 BCE), a Tullianum would have been more than three and a half meters below the floor of an ancient prison that still exists in Rome.[38] This is where Paul would have been decapitated.

Types of Custody

In his well-known book *Paul in Chains*, Richard Cassidy shows that the severity of imprisonment depended on the type of custody assigned. The law established three types of custody during the time of Justinian, many years after Philippians was written, but it is thought that these modalities already existed during the time of Paul. The cruelest custody was the prison (*carcer*) itself, which was mentioned above. There were two other types of custody: one called military custody (*custodia militaris*) and the other called free custody (*custodia libera*).[39] Military custody was very common in Paul's time. It consisted of chaining prisoners to one or two soldiers who were under the direction of a centurion. This type of custody was less severe than the *carcer* because it permitted prisoners to write letters and to receive visitors and donations such as food and clothing. The chains on the arms and hands (*manacles*) or on the legs and feet (*pedicles*) were very uncomfortable due in part to the weight of the iron.[40] The *custodia libera* (house arrest) could be in a prisoner's own house or in one rented for the purpose, and the prisoner could be supervised by a member of the family.[41] According to Angela Standhartinger, free custody was reserved for the elites, senators, and equestrians. The quality of the prisoner's treatment depended on the prisoner's status, with

36. Ibid., 140.
37. Ibid., 37.
38. Sallustio, *La conjuración de Catilina* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1986).
39. Cassidy, *Paul in Christ*, 37.
40. Ibid., 46.
41. Ibid., 42.

a partiality that favored prisoners with influence, power, or wealth. The laws *de jure* or *de facto* ("by law" or "by custom") clearly show the prejudice and partiality of Roman judges and officials in a two-tier system with one tier for the poor and the other for the rich.[42]

Food, financial help, and moral support were of vital importance to prisoners, above all, to those who suffered the *carcer* and the *custodia militaris*. Family members or friends were usually the ones who were eager to make the confinement of prisoners in chains more tolerable by providing food and clothing. They often provided further comfort by staying with the prisoner and helping with preparations for the prisoner's defense (2 Tim 4:16). Early Christian prisoners had the advantage of having brothers and sisters from the nearby ecclesia who usually took on the responsibility of attending to their needs. Various biblical and extrabiblical letters mention assisting prisoners for the sake of the gospel.

For example, in Philippians, Paul does not hide his great happiness at receiving the economic help and general support from the community at Philippi by way of Epaphroditus, no doubt sent by the leading women of the community (Phil 2:30; 4:10-18). Paul took great comfort as well from the presence of Timothy (Phil 2:19-24). Paul's letter to Philemon mentions the companionship and collaboration of Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, as well as Timothy and Onesimus (Phlm 1:24). But this was not always the case. Some prisoners were abandoned. The author of 2 Timothy, a prisoner in Rome (2 Tim 1:17), writes that Demas had abandoned him (4:10). In addition, Phygelus and Hermogenes from Asia (1:15) were ashamed of his chains and also abandoned him. Only Onesiphorus stayed on (1:16-17).

Charges against Prisoners

The most common crimes that led to imprisonment were robbery, damages to a third party, debts, and threats. There were also public crimes such as subversion (*seditio*) or treason against the emperor (*maiestas*). Paul surely was sent to jail for sedition or treason, which are almost the same thing.[43] Paul and Silas were accused in Thessalonica of "acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus" (Acts 17:7). Cassidy says that *maiestas* initially was

42. Elsa Támez, *Contra toda condena: La justificación por la fe desde los excluidos* (San José: DEI, 1991), 63; Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 41–43.

43. See Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 5–67.

a charge against those who were involved in subversive activities like military revolts or collaboration with an enemy.[44] Later, it became "whatever kind of conduct . . . damaged the majesty of the Roman people," meaning the emperor. The change began during the time of Augustus when Roman laws against sedition began to include defamation in the *lex maiestas*.[45] There were abuses of *lex maiestas* in the time of Tiberius and Gaius. Claudius initially abolished this charge but later restored it and imposed the death penalty on those who were accused. In Nero's time, the *lex maiestas*, according to Cassidy, "continued as a legal mechanism for protecting the emperor's position and prerogatives."[46]

Writing Letters in Prison: Implications

To write in prison was dangerous. There are testimonies of prisoners being put to death because of their guards' interpretations of their writing as speech against the emperor. Surveillance was continual; often spies were sent by Caesar to expose those with negative attitudes toward the emperor. Standhartinger analyzes the structures of communication among those in charge of prisoners during the Roman Empire. Of interest to her was how prisoners could write and what they could say in the context of constant surveillance and extreme censorship. Prisoners' writings clearly did not go directly to their intended recipients but first were confiscated by the guards or other warders for scrutiny.

Analyzing the risks of sending letters from a Roman prison reveals the strategies that prisoners used in their writings to circumvent the surveillance. The writings could present two discourses, one public and one hidden. Standhartinger takes up the contributions of James C. Scott from his book *Domination and the Art of Resistance*.[47] Scott provides tools that help the reader better understand and interpret specific political actions and strategies that subordinate groups who have no power to confront the powerful and who must adopt strategies for survival. He shines a light on the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities within

44. Ibid., 56.

45. See Narciso Vicente Santos Yanguas, "Acusaciones de alta traición en Roma en la época de Tiberio," *Memorias de historia antigua* 11–12 (1991): 169–70.

46. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 61.

47. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

asymmetric power relationships.[48] Even though Scott analyzes power relations among social groups, his strategy applies very well to the study of letters from prison, which Standhartinger applied in her analysis.

Finding two levels of meaning in letters written in prison is hardly surprising. According to Standhartinger, beginning with Augustus there was a web of internal security through the Roman secret police, a spy ring that extended to the provinces under Roman governors and generated lists of suspected persons. Epictetus advises caution when speaking to strangers because a soldier in civilian clothes might begin a conversation against the emperor in order to ferret out a person's seditious thoughts about the emperor so he could arrest and imprison that person.[49] For this reason, documents that were written in prison had to be composed very carefully in order to prevent interpretations of seditious criticism of the emperor. Often messages were hidden or ambiguous; prisoners also used pseudonyms or foreign languages.[50] As Standhartinger notes, "Because the letters were in danger of being read by persecutors, they tried to obscure the contents. In antiquity they already had systems of secret writings and cryptography. Opaque techniques included presenting the content as obscurely as possible, using pseudonyms, riddles, puzzles, and writing in another language."[51]

The writings had implications for the recipients as well, because explicit phrases, words, and names in prison writings could compromise them too. As Standhartinger has indicated, contact with prisoners who were considered subversive was a risk for those outside the prison, not only with respect to the shame of having a friend or relative in chains, but also because vigilant authorities suspected those who associated with prisoners. The spies of the Roman secret police were everywhere, so prisoners and recipients had to be very cautious in the communication of messages. Anything that might look suspicious could be used against them. It is noteworthy that, in early Christian times, we find that widows and orphans took charge of providing assistance to Christians imprisoned for their faith. In a letter to Cronius, Lucian of Samosata speaks against the Christians and mentions the widows and orphans who provide assistance for Christian prisoners: "and from early morning one could see next to the jail groups of the elderly, widows, and

48. Ibid., xii.
49. Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt," 157.
50. Ibid., 158.
51. Ibid. My translation.

orphans waiting."[52] Without knowing that leaders of the movement of the Resurrected One also visited the prisoners, it was not surprising to Lucian to see elderly people, widows, and orphans going about this task. Could this have been a strategy of the leaders of the movement to reduce the risk of danger?

"Criminal Record" of Paul

We know that Paul was imprisoned because he wrote about it himself in letters when he was free (2 Cor 11:23) and because he was explicit about his chains when he wrote from prison as in Phil 1:7, 17 and Phlm 1:1, 9. Much later, in Acts, Luke confirms Paul's imprisonment (16:22-24; 17:6-9; 22:24-30; 24:26–27:1, 41-43; 28:30). Clement of Rome, in his *Letter to the Corinthians* (5.6), affirms that Paul was imprisoned seven times (ἑπτάκις δέσμα).

Though the author of Acts presents a mostly positive view of the Roman Empire,[53] we cannot ignore Paul's suffering as a prisoner of conscience incarcerated for his ideas. Despite the questionable historicity of Acts, it is significant that its narrative contains frequent mention of prisons and tribunals in its narratives about Paul. In Acts, we find a long list of Paul's difficulties during his missionary journeys to Asia and later in Judea. In Philippi, he was stripped of his clothing, tortured, and chained to a stock because of his preaching about the resurrection of the dead (Acts 22–24). In Corinth, he was taken to the court to engage the proconsul Gallio in a doctrinal discussion (18:12-16). In Ephesus, Paul was almost lynched, and his followers and some authorities counseled that he should go into hiding (19:23-41). When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, the local people seized him to kill him (21:31), but the Roman military put him in prison (21:33). The tribune wanted to flog Paul in order to interrogate him for information about the great protest of the Jews in Jerusalem (22:24). Earlier, the tribune had confused him with an Egyptian who had "stirred up a revolt" and gone into the desert with four thousand followers (21:38). But, when Paul declared that he was a Roman citizen, he was not flogged (22:25-29), only chained (22:30).

In Caesarea, Governor Felix imprisoned Paul for two years without completing his trial, hoping for a bribe for Paul's freedom that never came (24:26-27). Although bribes were prohibited by Julian law (*Lex*

52. Lucian, *Obras ll: Sobre la muerte de Peregrino* (Madrid: Gredos, 1990), 246.

53. See Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 89–105.

Iulia), they were nonetheless a very common practice.[54] Governor Felix's successor, Porcius Festus, considered sending Paul back to Jerusalem to be judged, but seeing the danger of being assassinated, Paul appealed instead to the emperor (25:10-12). Governor Festus, in consultation with King Agrippa, sent Paul to Rome as a prisoner on a ship with other prisoners (27:1-2). When the ship grounded and wrecked on Malta, the soldiers decided to kill all of the prisoners to prevent escape, but the attendant centurion ordered them to refrain and all were saved (27:42-44). Acts ends with Paul living under the guard of a soldier in a rented house in Rome for two years (28:16, 30).

This summary of Acts gives us a glimpse of the suffering of the apostle in ancient prisons. Oddly, Luke does not conclude Acts with Paul's death, which probably occurred when Emperor Nero condemned Paul to death during his persecution of the Christians in 64 CE.[55] It is also curious that almost all of the pseudonymous Pauline letters have a prison setting. It seems that the Christian community was determined to remember Paul as a prisoner, an apostle who suffered for the cause of the gospel.

The type of custody that Paul experienced when he wrote Philippians and Philemon was *custodia militaris*. Paul was also held in a *carcer* (Acts 16:22-24), but not under *custodia libera*, as Luke suggests in Acts 28:30-31. According to Standhartinger, it is impossible that Paul, a Jewish craftsman, would have been granted *custodia libera* because it was reserved for the elite.[56] Military custody was less cruel than the *carcera*, but this doesn't mean that Paul didn't suffer while under military custody, watched over by soldiers and chained permanently to them. Paul had to depend on the character or temperament of the soldier or soldiers to whom he was chained. Paul's military custody was likely similar to that of Herod Agrippa's as narrated by Josephus.[57] If that is so, it supports Standhartinger's claim that Paul was not held in *custodia libera*, since Agrippa himself did not have the privilege of such custody.

There are also references to incarceration in pseudonymous letters about Paul's missions. In 2 Tim 2:9, the author affirms that he suffers in prison (δεσμῶν) like a common criminal, and in 1:16 he mentions that Onesiphorus was not ashamed of his chains (ἅλυσίν). Similarly, in

54. Támez, *Contra toda condena*, 64 n. 71.

55. Undo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 56.

56. Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt," 142–43.

57. Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.6, trans. William Whiston, www.gutenberg.org.

Col 4:18, the author asks his recipients that they remember his chains (δεσμῶν; see also Eph 6:20). This is why I assert that the early church wanted to remember Paul as a leader who suffered in prison because of his commitment to the Crucified One.

Interestingly, Paul's authentic letters written in prison do not often speak explicitly of his chains (Phil 1:7, 13, 14, 17; Phlm 1:10, 13; see also 1:1, 23). His suffering must be read between the lines, as in Phil 1:17-26, where he speaks of his impotence against his adversaries, his uncertainty facing a death sentence, his longing for his companions in Philippi, and in Phil 4:12, where he mentions enduring hunger. Nevertheless, when Paul was free and felt obligated to refer to his experience in prison, he spoke clearly of it, as he does in Rom 16:7.

To be a prisoner meant shame and humiliation,[58] a serious problem in a culture ruled by patterns of honor and shame. In 2 Tim 1:16, Pseudo-Paul expresses his gratitude that Onesiphorus was not ashamed of his chains, while Phygelus and Hermogenes had abandoned him. All of this leads me to conclude that it is not an exaggeration when Paul speaks to the Corinthians frankly about his terrible experience in the prisons in Asia (2 Cor 1:8-10). It seems that Paul's writing and theology are always conditioned by his life or death situation.

Data on the Letter to the Philippians

As mentioned above, I set aside here the debate over whether Philippians is made up of one or three letters.[59] Also, since Paul does not mention the city in which he is held prisoner, the geography of the letter will always be uncertain. Although Ephesus seems more probable since it is closer to Philippi and would permit easier communication, there are arguments for and against both Ephesus and Rome, which are the most frequent proposals. I admit to believing that Paul was probably alluding to his problems in the prison in Ephesus when he wrote to the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:18-10). Though for some reason he was set free, I think it is probable that he was condemned to death in Ephesus and related his experience to the community in Corinth (1 Cor 15:32; 2 Cor 1:8-10). According to Standhartinger, there were frequent amnesties when there was a change of emperor, sug-

58. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 48; Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, 48, 58–60.

59. Some scholars hold that there were three letters called A, B, and C: A contains 4:10-20; B contains 1:1–3:1 and parts of 4:21-23; and C contains 3:2-21 and parts of 4:1-9. See John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

gesting that when Nero rose to the throne, he could have freed prisoners of conscience like Paul.[60] With respect to dating, if Philippians was written from a prison in Rome, it would be dated between 60 and 62 CE, after his letter to the Romans. If it was written from a prison in Ephesus, it would have been written between 54 and 55 CE, under the Emperor Nero.

It is important, however, to take into account that Philippi was a Roman colony with Roman war veterans who guaranteed the interests of the emperor in the region. Philippi was strategically situated because it was on the Via Egnatia, it was not far from the sea, and there were gold and silver mines nearby. There were inhabitants who were Roman citizens but, according to Peter Oakes,[61] the majority of the residents were Greek, along with some native Thracians. The Romans owned the land, occupied official positions, were the principal employers of the farmers, and "monopolized wealth and high status."[62] The Romans were also the major slave owners. The Roman war veterans arrived in Philippi in several waves over the years and were given land as payment for their military service in the imperial army.[63]

Women Recipients of Letters Written in Prison

Why women? According to Acts 16:11-40, after passing through Neapolis, Paul and Silas arrived at Philippi from Troas, and on the Sabbath they were sent outside the city to the river, either the Gangites or Angites, to a "place of prayer" (προσευχή). There they found some women and began speaking with them. In this group they met Lydia, an outstanding woman leader from Thyatira and a worshiper of God. She was a small merchant who sold purple cloth and had a house that she could offer as hospitality for them. She accepted the message of the Gospel presented by Paul and Silas and was baptized together with her household, all of whom were collaborators in her trade. Lydia was probably a widow, which put her in charge of her own household so it was she, not a man, who invited Paul and Silas to her home (16:15). I believe that, though men, including Epaphroditus, were also present in the community at Philippi, the majority of members were women. Consequently I use feminine language when addressing the recipients of the letter in order to highlight the presence of women.

60. Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt," 150.
61. Oakes, *Philippians*, 54.
62. Ibid., 74.
63. Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice*, 60.

We must take very seriously the risks for recipients of a letter written from prison when they live in a Roman colony containing the emperor's ex-military men. This is pertinent. The recipients risk being considered accomplices of the friend in prison, seen as an enemy of Roman society and the state. The letter's recipients were not the only ones at risk; anyone who brought help or visited the prisoners could also be in danger. Timothy and Epaphroditus were in this delicate position and had to take precautions when visiting Paul in prison. Accounting for the risk that the recipients ran reveals that a name is missing from the letter to the Philippians. When Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind (Phil 4:2-3), he asks an unnamed person to help the two women to be of one accord. Paul calls this person "my loyal companion," literally, "genuine companion of the yoke" (γνήσιε σύζυγε), which is grammatically masculine in Greek. This person was probably a woman, Lydia, as I show in the analysis of these verses below. The use of a masculine expression could be Paul's strategy to protect Lydia from the watchful Roman soldiers.

Prison as a Theological Location: Grace and Praxis

In his letters, Paul elaborated on his theological thought from a specific context. This theological location in Philippians is prison. The same is true for other people imprisoned for the sake of the Gospel. Frei Betto confirms this by stating that incarceration leads to "a deep theological experience."[64] In Paul's letters from prison, we can observe a dialectic between grace and praxis (practice) rather than a contradiction. For Paul, like any Jew, everything depends on the Divine, but this dependency does not prevent struggle in the movement for defense of the Gospel; all that happens is the will of the Divine. In Paul's particular situation in prison, his faith grows even stronger, and his dependence on the Divine becomes absolute because to be in chains and to feel impotent demands his dependence on God.

Paul's relationship with his companions in the movement in Philippi is also shaped by dependence on the Divine, as indicated by the presence of the Divine throughout the letter. For example, the companions in Philippi are excellent collaborators in spreading and defending the Gospel, but it is the Divine who began and will complete this work through them (Phil 1:6). They must continue to do their work so that all might be saved, but it is the Divine who is "enabling them to will and to work for his good

64. Frei Betto, *Cartas*, 29.

pleasure" (2:12-13). For the cause of the Gospel, the people risk their lives, just as Epaphroditus did because of his solidarity with Paul (2:30).

Furthermore, the prisoner has encountered Christ because he was encountered by Christ (3:9). Here Paul challenges those who place their confidence in their society's laws or in their cultural identity, considering themselves superior to others. To the prisoner, social and cultural status is not important; he has left it all behind (3:5-7). He has chosen another way to serve and live, where the Crucified-Resurrected One reigns. This choice is very different from the expectations of the Roman Empire, particularly that of honoring the emperor's domination over all his subjects (vassals), both in Rome and throughout the entire empire. For Paul, the government of the Resurrected One is founded on the justice of grace and care where mercy is a priority of the Divine.

So it is that the prisoner has chosen to orient his life, practices, and attitudes to an absolute dependence on grace in the midst of hostility and death. The example of the Messiah's life as a leader of the movement as seen in the christological hymn in Phil 2:6-11 gives Paul the strength to continue living under prison conditions. According to the hymn, Jesus experienced all the worst things that a human being could suffer: he became a slave (servant); he humbled himself; and he was condemned to a death on a cross, which was the worst and most humiliating death under Roman law. But the justice of the Divine, which was different from Roman law, vindicated Jesus, exalted him, and made him the Lord of the universe, and with this abolished the authority of all oppressive powers in the world. Narratives of the Divine's solidarity with human life gave meaning to Paul's existence in prison. The power that resurrected the Crucified One gave Paul the strength to continue living because he too expects to be resurrected from the dead (3:11). Paul is able to resist despair in prison because of this promise. If he sees the death of the Crucified One in his own chained body, it is not because he is promoting a sacrificial theology. Rather, his maltreated body indirectly denounces those who sacrifice human beings and gives meaning to suffering that looks forward to the experience of resurrection.

Letters from Prison as a Literary Genre

There is no lack of letters from prison during the twentieth century, letters written by political prisoners such as Rosa Luxemburg, Lolita Lebrón, Nelson Mandela, Frei Betto, Karl Gaspar, and Ingrid Betancourt. There are also documents written by people like Etty Hillesum, Carmiña Navia, and Neila Serrano who experienced other kinds of captivity.

Common elements repeated in the writings of these people and in other prison literature, such as poems or testimonies, suggest that "letters from prison" are a literary genre. According to the typography of Roman epistolary writing, the Letter to the Philippians has been classified as a "Letter of Friendship,"[65] a "Family Letter,"[66] or "A Christian Hortatory Letter of Friendship."[67] These classifications are inadequate, however, because they fail to take into account the prison context in which Philippians was written and the experience of the prisoner. Considering "letters from prison" a genre written by persons imprisoned for their ideas reveals not only the prisoners' suffering but also how their beliefs are shaped by being punished for thinking that challenges the *status quo.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela, Karl Gaspar, Frei Betto, Etty Hillesum, Neila Serrano, and Carmiña Navia speak from great interior strength; they relativize material things as they live under the uncertainty about their trial and sentence. Constantly concerned for those outside, they theologize from their experience of being deprived of freedom; they give advice to their friends, contemplate their possible end, and are willing to die for their ideals. Truly, to write from prison generates a particular type of literature. With respect to the literary production of prisoners under the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973–1985), Uruguayan writer Alfred Alzugarat observes,

> At first thought, nothing seems as fragile as a sheet of paper. Nevertheless, nothing is more durable. When writings are an act of resistance, words remain beyond the reach of executioners. If the prisons of the dictatorship were one of the most emblematic examples of the worst times in this country, we can also affirm that human dignity liberated a hard battle that, among its multiple consequences, left artistic and literary works that are invaluable. In the closed universe of prison, writing had to be reinvented. It was born between sessions of torture with a vocation to bear testimony, growing in the solitude of the cell where there were only memories, sheets of medical instructions, and leaves to smoke. The collective, daily writing of letters, and the immense

65. Loveday Alexander, "Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians," *JSNT* 37 (1989): 87–101.

66. Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 17–21.

67. Gordon D. Fee, *Comentario de la Epístola a los Filipenses*, Colección teológica contemporánea, trans. Dora González and Ismael López (Barcelona: CLIE, 2004), 34–48.

> quantity of reading that could devour a prisoner, decisively influenced the development of this type of literature.[68]

Throughout this commentary, I present voices of contemporary prisoners that help to better articulate the prison setting of Philippians.

Voices of Contemporary Christian Prisoners

In this section I present the voices of three ex-prisoners who wrote exclusively for this commentary at my request. They are Frei Betto, Neila Serrano Barragán, and Carmiña Navia Velasco, all friends of mine who have had the experience of being in prison. They all responded to my questions about how they understand the letter to the Philippians from their own experience as people who have been deprived of their freedom. These three people are Christians, but they also represent different ideological frameworks: Frei Betto comes from the Catholic liberation theology perspective; Serrano is evangelical Protestant; and Navia is Catholic and feminist. It is easy to find in their writings the characteristic features of all prisoners incarcerated for political reasons or because of injustice. I consider these people and the prison writers who appear later in my commentary, such as Etty Hillesum, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Nelson Mandela, to be collaborators in the development in this discussion.

Carlos Alberto Libanio Cristo, known as Frei Betto, is a member of the Dominican Order. He is a liberation theologian and an author of countless books of different genres.[69] He is still an activist for human rights. When he was a student of theology he was imprisoned in Porto Alegre, Brazil, on November 9, 1969, because of his participation in the resistance movement against the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985). He was released four years later, in 1973. He spent two years in one prison housing other political prisoners and two years in a second prison with a mixed prisoner population. From prison, Frei Betto wrote many

68. Alfredo Alzugarat, *Trincheras de papel: dictadura y literatura carcelaria en Uruguay* (Montevideo: Trilce, 2007), back cover.

69. Some of them, in addition to *Cartas da Prisão*, are *Oração na ação* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1977); *O fermento na masa* (Petropolis: Vozes, 1981); *Batismo de Sangue, Os dominicanos e a morte de Carlos Marighella* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1985); *Fome de pão e de beleza* (São Paulo: Siciliano, 1990); *A obra do Artista. Uma visão holística do Universo* (São Paulo: Ática, 1995); *Entre todos os homens* (São Paulo: Ática, 1997); *Gosto de uva* (Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2003); *Oito vias para ser feliz. Introdução as bem-aventuranças do Evangelho* (São Paulo: Planeta, 2014).

letters, which were originally published in two books. The letters were written with passion, compassion, and tenderness. Through them, we see clearly the experience of prisoners facing physical, psychological, and legal issues. For Frei Betto, jail was his theological location, the place where his commitment to the Jesus of the gospels was reaffirmed. He assumed the suffering of Jesus on the cross just as Paul did. The reason for Frei Betto's arrest was for supporting the cause of the kingdom of God as expressed in the option for the poor and persecuted, which was contrary to the cause supported by the military dictatorship in Brazil.

Frei Betto wrote letters to his parents, siblings, friends, and many lay and religious women. He often speaks about women, but in a letter he wrote to Marlene on June 20, 1971, he emphasizes his conversion to the service of others and denounces how society has made women into objects to serve men.[70] He cared deeply about the recipients of his letters and also for the inmates with whom he lived.

Along with others imprisoned for political reasons, while in prison Frei Betto devoted himself to Scripture reading, prayer, and, above all, helping the other prisoners, not only spiritually, but also by giving classes in theater and teaching secondary school subjects such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, and Portuguese. He also went on a hunger strike to protest prisoner living conditions. Unlike Paul, who had only the solidarity of the community of Philippi, thousands of people around the world were in solidarity with Frei Betto. The solidarity with those outside helped him to keep up his spirits despite the prison conditions.

In one of his letters to his parents on December 25, 1969, Frei Betto wrote,

> Prison is the place of criminals, thieves, vagabonds and bandits. For us it is an honor, glory and joy to live part of our lives in this manger. But not everyone will understand that, just as not many understood the mystery of the carpenter's son who suffered between thieves. You can only understand this because of a deep ideal or the light of faith. Those who imprisoned us are unable to understand why we remain strong, cheerful and willing. We never give them the pleasure of seeing us disturbed and saddened.[71]

But at other times the tone of his letters is grim, as when he wrote to his friend Maria Christina. In the following paragraph, this grimness is evident if one reads between the lines when he surrounds the phrase

70. Frei Betto, *Cartas*, 107–10.
71. Ibid., 14.

"attempted suicide" with quotation marks and ends the sentence with a suggestive ellipse after DOI-CODI.[72]

> Christina,
>
> Today is Sunday, rainy and sad. Fifty prisoners try to arrange themselves in one cell. Many sleep on the floor on mattresses; there is no space for more beds. The silence reflects the humid climate of this grey day. It is not a silence of calm, inner peace. You feel suffocated. So many together but few speak. Perhaps some would like to shout out loud. But they keep that desire to themselves. Why is that? I do not know, nobody knows. In prison one always waits. It's like a platform in a train station without rails. . . . Today we learned that Friar Tito de Alencar Lima "attempted suicide" in DOI-CODI . . . Why are we silent? Tomorrow the same thing can happen to any of us. We have no protection or guarantee. Just like the Jews and Communists condemned by the Nazis. Times change, evil endures, oppression gets new names and takes on new forms. Our silence is the same as Mary in front of her Son.[73]

Frei Betto says that his experience of prison marked him for life. When asked how he understands Philippians from his experience as a political prisoner, Frei Betto sent me the "Letter from Frei Betto" included here.

Letter from Frei Betto

São Paulo, 09 July 2012

Dear Elsa,

I reread the Letter to the Philippians. I am sending you the following observation, which I hope will be useful to you.

1. The "psychology" of the sender's letter is typical of someone who is incarcerated. The experience of imprisonment is one of total nakedness. The prisoner has no defense against his jailers. He or she is totally vulnerable. It all depends on them. So you dialogue with death. Life is limited, because the body is imprisoned, even while the mind is free. The whole letter is a tension between the possibility of death and the care for the community of Philippi. At the time, the letter would have been the great legacy that Paul could leave. In it he is attempting to organize things (4:2) so that everything will be all right.

72. Detachment of Operations and Information–Internal Defense Operations Center.
73. Frei Betto, *Cartas*, 23.

2. Philippians is almost a letter-testament (1:23). Paul, the cornerstone of the Philippian community, wants to perpetuate himself through them (1:6, 9-11).
3. The imprisonment of a fighter paradoxically strengthens his companions' will to fight (1:14, 28). It is as if he wins some kind of crown of martyrdom (2:17). The prisoner was officially recognized as an enemy and his cause was something worth fighting for. This magnifies him (1:21). Prison either destroys or uplifts people. In Paul's case, he is strengthened.
4. Paul is a competitor. He wants the best and does not support anyone who wants to plant or harvest what he has sown (1:17-19).
5. This is a letter of thanks (4:10, 16), and thanks from one who faces the immediate possibility of death.

Neila Serrano de Barragán is from Colombia, a doctor of internal and chemical-pharmaceutical medicine from the National University. She holds a PhD in pharmacology from the University of Sorbonne in Paris. She also studied rheumatology and allergies at Harvard University. She is currently a professor at the National University in Bogota and has her own doctor's office for her patients. She comes from a traditional evangelical perspective, and her interest now is to evangelize intellectuals and scientists, showing in her lectures that science and the Bible are compatible. Neila Serrano was jailed from August 4, 1993, until January 31, 1995, in the women's prison El Buen Pastor (The Good Shepherd) in Bogotá. She was sentenced to forty-six months in prison for paying a ransom to free her husband, a successful businessman from an upper-class background who had been kidnapped by the M19 guerrillas (now demobilized). The law against paying ransom to guerillas was repealed in 1994, a year and a half after Serrano was imprisoned. After the guerrillas kidnapped her husband, Neila decided to sell all their belongings to save him. She preferred to go to jail rather than let her husband die in the jungle. Serrano says that the experience of prison changed her life for good.

Those who know Neila know little of her experience in jail because she hardly ever talks about it. However, she agreed to an interview with me in which she shared her impressions of the Letter to the Philippians based on her experience as a prisoner. She recounts her experience both as a Christian and as a woman in the women's prison and compares it with Paul's experience. We recorded the interview in September 2013.

Interview with Neila Serrano de Barragán

Elsa: Neila, What is your impression of the Letter to the Philippians from your perspective as a prisoner?

Neila: The Letter to the Philippians is a letter filled with joy, where Paul, despite being in prison, gives thanks to God because he has a reason to be proud to be a prisoner. My case in prison was different from other women who were imprisoned unjustly. What I did wrong was to pay a ransom to free my husband, which was illegal. I did it consciously because I wanted to save my husband's life, and he is alive! In that moment, I said it was thanks to me, but no, it was thanks to God. He is alive and still with us, and if the price for him to be alive was for me to go to jail, then blessed be jail. When something justifies an act, it gives motivation and makes it worth paying the price. Paul paid a price for preaching the gospel of the Lord. Therefore, he was proud of being a prisoner, and because of this he said, I am a slave of the Lord. He had a reason to be proud of the chains. I also had a reason to be proud of my captivity.

But the uncertainty that one experiences is great. How do you get a law repealed for just one person? It is very easy to be sent to prison, but getting out is very difficult even if you are innocent and have all the evidence in your favor. Once you are in jail, it is very difficult for the law to recognize that you are innocent. Then the uncertainty is great because you never know how long you will have to wait. Initially I was sentenced to forty-six months, and forty-six months is almost four years. It is a very long time. They sentenced me without the possibility of a reduction of the sentence. I was a physician. Some of my patients were senators who began the work to free me because I was the first and only person imprisoned for paying a ransom to the guerrillas. But like most things, my case took a year for the senate to study and prove that it was not a crime to pay kidnappers, and then for the president to sign the decree and finally enforce it. I spent more than a year in jail constantly wondering if I would have to stay there for the full four years.

But what I saw in my companions' cases is that having money is the most important thing. Lawyers need to be paid and discovering the truth must be paid for with money. I saw this in the case of two girls who, while they were out on leave from prison, committed suicide because uncertainty can lead one to see that the system has no value, that life has no value, and that we are instruments the system uses to show the strength of those in power. But the person who has a cause feels very differently, even if the cause does not change anything, like in Mandela's case. He knew he was fighting for people's rights and that being jailed was worth it, and that was his incentive. But if

Mandela had been imprisoned for being responsible for a massacre [which he was accused of, but did not commit], his feeling would have been different.

Paul was in prison because he had a philosophy. He said: I am imprisoned for preaching, and that is worthwhile, and it does not matter if I give my life for it. That is the incentive there. So any inmates who are unjustly arrested have to find what motivates them. If the unjust arrest is not a punitive act for a crime, one has to show that one did not commit the violation, which is very difficult. But if the unjust arrest is a punitive act for a crime, then they can say, if you leave, you will commit the crime again. Unjust arrest does not happen only with the people who adopt a cause, but with other common criminals. I will give an example.

One of my friends, a lady sixty-four years of age who had been living happily in prison for sixteen years. She said she was blessed to be in prison because if she got out she would kill her husband again. Her husband had raped three of his daughters. She reported him repeatedly, but she was never believed because no one believes a woman. When she saw that the law did not help, she took the law into her own hands and killed him. She was imprisoned for defending her three daughters who came to visit her out of infinite love Sunday after Sunday.

She said, "It does not matter that I am here for twenty years. I do not care if it was thirty or forty years," because she feels justified by what she did. She said that what she did was for the best.

She also said, "The law did not help me, and I could not let my husband continue raping my daughters, and he did it in front of me, and I had not the courage to do anything until I got the chance. I got a gun. I threatened him and killed him. I called the police immediately and told them I killed my husband. I explained why, and yet that did not help my defense at all."

Then I noticed that because she had a motivation it made her feel happy to be in jail. She did not spend time worrying that it was undignified for her to be in prison. She said, "I will leave with my head held high; my daughters are fine now." Because what one worries about are those who are outside of the prison.

I, Neila, did not worry about myself because I was all right in jail. I was worried for my husband and my children. After the abduction, my husband had no financial resources. I had always practiced medicine and also taught at the university. With the check I received from the university we helped poor people. Well, that happened to be our way of life. To pay the ransom for my husband, I had to sell everything we had. When my husband was released he was physically and psychologically damaged. He had worked in foreign trade, but now we had no money to buy or export goods. There was no income for the home. I was fine

in jail because I had something to eat, but they had nothing to eat. . . . I had the opportunity to refuse food or start seeing food as something of a luxury. I decided to see it as something delicious, but my children and my husband were hungry.

The brothers and sisters of the church and my patients started to do things like leave a basket of groceries at the door. They would ring the bell; and one of my three children would go to the door, but no one would be there. Or they would leave an envelope with money. They broke the record on prison visits. Like Paul, they visited me frequently. Saturday was visitation for the men, and women came on Sunday. There was no visitation midweek. I told visitors not to bring me anything but to bring me the money they would have spent. With the money they brought to the jail I would maintain my husband and children as much as I was able. We went from owning our home to paying rent. Sometimes our electricity or water services were cut because my family did not have enough money to pay the bills.

My concern was for those outside because inside I did not need anything. I had my motivation. Inside prison, a plastic cup had a huge value because glass was not allowed. I had to keep that plastic cup so that it could be used many times. Small things had a great value. The value is the value of small things in daily life. There was nothing of value in my cell. I decorated it so it was nice, and it was the place where we gathered to pray.

Elsa: How did you use your time in prison?

Neila: My professional life before was very active, and I thought, Lord, suddenly you brought me here to rest from so much activity! But it turns out that when I was in jail, I was given two jobs. Everyone works there. One of the jobs I had was to be in charge of the amenities. At 5:00 a.m. I opened the place where the cleaning equipment was kept and gave it to the girls who were in charge of cleaning. I had to supervise their work. So I did ministry with these girls. I taught them that there was nothing more beautiful than cleaning because this was our home. This gave meaning to their life.

All the inmates were divided into different workshops. There were eight workshops with different things to do. The colonel of the jail asked me to motivate the girls in each workshop. I had to go from workshop to workshop for a minimum of thirty minutes each day, bringing an encouraging word. The prisoners in the workshops were making ponchos [warm stoles], cases for needles and thread that were put in hotels, and many other things. They received only 20,000 pesos per month for this work [about 10 US dollars]. Work was compulsory. Remission of time served was given for work based on the number of hours worked. So when they asked me

to do the talk, I had to get up at 2:00 a.m. to do my meditation and prepare the talk that I would give in the workshops. I had to bring the word of God to six or eight workshops, but I had to return very quickly by 12:30, as I had to go to the dungeon and bring that same word to the girls who were punished in the dungeon. The dungeon was terrible. That was the work I did every day. But after a month in prison, the warden, who was listening to the Word, found that it was also important for the guards. So every day at 8:00 a.m., I gave a prayer workshop to the guards and prison staff. This was my job.

Dinner was at 6:00 p.m. At dinner we went with a plastic jar, and they put the food in that, and then we went to eat in our rooms. At noon we ate in the dining room and at night in our room. Then at 6:15 p.m. the gate was closed; it was a terrible, frightening sound. That is a sound I have never forgotten to this day. It is the sound you hear in the movies when the bars of a jail close. It is a sound that shook me and reinforced my loneliness.

Sometimes, after closing the cell doors at 6:15 to 6:30 p.m., a guard would come and take me out of my room to go through the corridors asking if anyone needed medicine. They let me have a small purse with medication for a headache, but most people really just wanted to talk. I remember going through those silent corridors where the majority of people were crying. There were those who were guilty and those who were not guilty. All felt the loneliness of not being able to be with their children. We were women, most of us with children. It was very hard to see and to hear them mourn as I did my rounds.

The doors are roughly a meter and half thick, and the rest was bars. We were allowed to put up a curtain to keep out the cold wind, as there were bars but there was no glass. Some put up a curtain; others put a blanket to cover the gaps. When I reached the door, I use to ask them what is wrong. They would begin to cry and talk to me. I would listen to them and encourage them. I would then go to my cell around 10:00 or 11:00 at night, and then it would hit me. All day my mission was to smile, lift people's spirits, but I collapsed several times. Once when I broke down and collapsed, one of the guards called the colonel—he was the director—who came and hit me. Scolding me, he said, "You are here to help your companions. You cannot collapse. It is forbidden." Then at times I saw that these people were asking more of me than I could give because the guards, the colonel, and my companions did not take into account that I would get upset or collapse.

I guess that was the same with Paul. Paul spoke of the strength of the Lord, but Paul had to have moments when he felt loneliness and he had to ask, "Is it worth it?" Or "I could die and what if Jesus did not exist?" However

great your faith, there are times when you wonder if there really is a God and ask why am I here suffering this? This happened to me, and I said, why Lord? What did I do? There are moments of confrontation, however great our faith. We fall, and this we have all experienced. I used to see this in the lady who killed her husband. A couple of times I saw her crying and asking herself, "Was it worth it? Was it right?" She replied, "Yes, I did well," and survived. There is a duality in people.

In order to help the others, I used the following strategy. I got them to write on a piece of paper, "These are the reasons I have to live." I think Paul did the same to survive because it is not only in the body that we feel pain. The worst pain you can feel is the pain of absence, such as the absence of my children and husband who are far away. I am wondering how they are doing and what is happening with them. [. . .]

I imagine Paul was thinking about the Lord Jesus: "Did I really see you? Did I actually hear your voice or imagine I heard it? Is this really valuable? Actually, you are my God, not the emperor. Truly all the great things that I, Paul, experienced were worth losing in order to gain something uncertain."

Eternal life is an uncertainty that we, when we are in love with the Lord, have seen in the lives of great people who have died. At the moment they faced death, they wondered whether they had done the correct thing. So that's what I see, in relation to Paul, as it relates to what I saw among those who are unjustly imprisoned and those who had a motive for being there, which is different from the inmate who had no choice.

Elsa: What do you think about the recipients of the Letter to the Philippians?

Neila: When one is sent to prison, whether it is for a crime or unjustly, that person is said to be of no value to society. Sometimes people say, "So many people have died in jail," or, "They are prisoners, not human beings." But in our system, as in Paul's day, family and friends are also discriminated against. When they are in line to visit the prisoners, they are treated like prisoners. It is like telling them: you are as guilty as the one inside; you are worthless too. This has an effect on family and friends.

At the time when I was in prison, women who visited the prison were given a vaginal examination to look for drugs. This practice was later discontinued. My daughter, who was a child, had to be subjected to that, and it really hurt me. I also had friends from church who came to see me crying because of the way they were searched. Yet in spite of that they continued to visit, and it was terrible. So when one is in prison, one needs to support those on the outside so that they have the courage to continue visiting and that they do not stop.

Euodia and Syntyche may have had their faith weakened. If a man like Paul was a prisoner,

they might have been thinking at any time, "I too could be put in prison. What about my husband? What about my children?" We do not know the kind of pressure the family members were under. They could have been told, "Stop that. Do not keep preaching. You are going to be put in prison. Look at Paul. Look at where they have put your leader." So those who are inside do not have anything to lose because they have lost everything and they are miserable. They have nothing else to lose. Then they have to look at how to support those outside, and I saw this in all of the prisoners. Whether they were guilty or not, they were always thinking about their family. In the conversations during the visit on Sundays, I observed that the strongest ones were the prisoners because they were the ones who gave encouragement to visitors, saying, "I'm good here, but you can do this and that." But then after the visitors went, all of us prisoners fell apart because, when visitors came, we went around with a smile, but when we saw the children and the family leave crying, it was terrible.

Paul had to encourage his disciples and tell them to enjoy themselves. He did not know if Syntyche, Euodia, Lydia, or some of the men would at any time also become prisoners. He enjoyed the strength they were giving him, but he had to have many moments of kneeling and crying and asking God, the Lord Jesus Christ, to give him strength. [. . .] To give strength to those on the outside is natural when in that situation.

Elsa: How was censorship in prison?

Neila: All the letters that that one writes in prison are read. You know that the letters you send are going to be read by the guard assigned for that. Any letter that I sent could have three outcomes. First, it could be vetoed and not sent. Or it could be used to implicate others. And finally, it could reach its destination. One learns as a prisoner to write in a special coded language to say things that the recipients can understand but that the censor cannot. Then when you want to say, for example, I have money saved in a vase, you would say instead, remember that vase and have a look at it. What you are doing is encouraging them to go to that place, but you do not say what you have there. I wrote letters, but what you most want as a prisoner is to receive a letter, and also to express what you feel. You always put a positive spin on things. You have to send those letters unsealed so they can be read. I used codes. In the end, one reads the Philippians letter differently when one takes into account that Paul wrote it when he was in prison.

Carmiña Navia Velasco is a member of the Xaverian congregation in Cali, Colombia. She is a philosopher, writer,[74] and feminist who has written biblical and theological reflections from a feminist perspective. She was professor of literature at the Universidad del Valle, where she received an honorary doctorate. Carmiña is the founder of the Cultural Center: Weaving Sisterhood, directed by a group of Catholic lay and religious women. Carmiña Navia had always considered herself aligned with liberation theology, but since 2005, she has moved away from it and taken a critical stance considering it to be a patriarchal theology.

In 1994 Carmiña Navia was kidnapped by the guerrilla ELN, Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army), which is still active in Colombia. Although Carmiña Navia lived with her Xaverian sisters in a poor neighborhood of Cali, she was kidnapped by guerrillas because her family was considered to be wealthy. Carmiña Navia's kidnapping was brief. She was held as a hostage in the jungle for twelve days with no communication from anyone. However, this experience marked her for life.

At my request, on March 30, 2014, Carmiña Navia sent me her thoughts on the letter to the Philippians, read in light of her brief kidnapping. She titled it "United in a Common Dream." Although she insists there is a difference between prisoners and hostages, many dimensions of her experience as hostage are similar to that of a prisoner.

United in a Common Dream: Reflections on Paul's Letter to the Women of the Church at Philippi

It is very important to place ourselves in Paul's context: He was a political prisoner. From this perspective, the letter will acquire its full meaning. Losing your freedom, being dependent on others who threaten to take your life, is an experience that colors your actions, your feelings, your vision of the future.

Twenty years ago, I was in a situation where I lost my freedom. In 1994 I was kidnapped by the leader of the ELN, Ejército de Liberación Nacional, José María Becerra. It was a relatively short

74. Among her books: *Judit, Relato feminista en la Biblia* (Bogotá: Indoamerican Press Service, 1988); *La mujer en la biblia. Opresión y liberación* (Bogotá: Indoamerican Press Service, 1991); *La mujer protagonista en la narrativa colombiana* (Bogotá: El Búho, 1992); *El Dios que nos revelan las mujeres* (Bogotá: RELAT, 1998); *Jesús de Nazaret, miradas femeninas* (Quito: Tierra Nueva, 2002); *Guerra y paz en Colombia, las mujeres escriben* (La Habana: Award of Casa de las Américas, 2004).

experience—twelve days—but it has left me with some bad memories. So from this, I can identify with Paul throughout his letter. Depending on others and their weapons and power generates fear, anguish, permanent questions, and a deep uncertainty because of not knowing one's fate. Clearly, if these feelings inhabit our body, they strengthen the bond between ourselves and the people we have momentarily lost but with whom we still interact, strengthening the ties with those we love . . . and more so if these people follow our fate and are committed to us, such as the community of the Philippians to whom Paul writes.

I think there is a profound difference between the experience of being in prison and a kidnapping. Paul could communicate from prison, receive the gestures of solidarity from his friends, write to them and receive their news. . . . A person who is kidnapped has no access to any communication with their own who are on the other side. This is an insurmountable difference between prisoners and those who are kidnapped. It creates much more anguish and pain.

But then and ever since the time of my return, I have been marked by the attitude of those close to me. Of course, if it was possible, I would have written to them. When I returned I knew that they had tried everything possible, especially the leaders of my congregation. They condemned my disappearance and sent all kinds of messages of solidarity and support. There was definitely a similarity with the situation of the Apostle of Tarsus: the distance and especially the fact that your life is in the hands of others reinforces your sense of belonging to a family, a community, a project. So it is easy to feel in tune with what is expressed in 1:27-30: "You stand firm in one spirit, according to the Gospel, in tune with Jesus Christ."

Equally, the presence of God is the presence that motivates and drives your days. It is that presence that accompanies your nights. . . . It increases in the midst of loneliness, anguish, and pain. Almost all testimonies of those kidnapped appear to be conscious of it. On both sides, from both sides without touching each other's paths they come together; just as between Paul and the Philippians communion is woven and strengthened. . . . Community is palpable. This thought can come in the form of a letter, from other kinds of expressions of love, from the practice of solidarity in struggle and resistance, or in the form of protest and complaint.

In the darkness of the night that surrounds us, growing inside is the Divine Light that sustains our being and gives strength to our days. Surrounded by forces of nature of such intensity in the

Pacific Coast jungle where I was held, Wisdom and Christ became incarnate in the torrent, presenting a new face to me and etching it indelibly on my new life coming out of this experience.

In his letter to the Philippian community, Paul speaks especially to the women leaders. . . . My experience also is loosely connected with various large groups led by women who showed their strength in the Valle del Cauca in the joyous commitment to the cause of the Gospel.

They are all, equally, situations where the immense power of the Mystery that dwells in the hearts and in history leads us to love, truth, and justice.

Carmiña Navia Velasco
Cali, March 2014

Each one of these three captive voices presents a different context in time, space, and grounds for the arrest or kidnapping, but we see that they share similar experiences, such as uncertainty, concern for their loved ones that are outside (family, coworkers, or friends), struggles with time management, and feeling an increase in their inner strength due to their faith in Christ as well as in what they do. They also express a very particular joy that helps them to endure their vulnerability. We find similar experiences for Paul in his letter to the Philippians. In my analysis, I allude to the experiences of the three voices heard here and also to other voices of contemporary prisoners.

It is worth clarifying here that to read the letter to the Philippians from the perspective of a prisoner is only one of many entrances that the text allows us to use. This is why my analysis of the letter is not impartial. On the contrary, in my discussion of each section of the text, readers can see a specific perspective: a political, ideological, and feminist approach.

Philippians 1:1-26

Greetings, Prayers, and Prison

The Greeting (1:1-2)

In a filthy and foul smelling place in a Roman *Praetorium*, Paul begins to dictate his letter to the Philippians, a group of participants in the movement of the Resurrected One, the majority of whom are women. His condition is terrible because he is chained to one or two soldiers as stipulated by military custody rules. Fortunately he has a permanent visitor, Timothy, and a temporary visitor, Epaphroditus (2:25), who was sent by the recipients of this letter. Paul includes Timothy as a sender of the letter. This is not unusual; he often includes others when sending his letters, especially Timothy (see 2 Cor 1:1; Phlm 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1). It is quite possible that Timothy is the one writing the letter as Paul dictates it. With a bribe to the soldier (or soldiers) he is chained to, Paul could have written with his own hand, but he dislikes bribing corrupt authorities (Acts 24:26). Certainly Timothy is not simply a scribe; even though the rest of the letter is written in first-person singular, Paul wants to make the coauthor official. As is common in these cases, Timothy would be conversing with Paul about the things he is writing, taking part in the content and form by clarifying points or expressing them in a better manner. Timothy is well known by the recipients because he has visited them with Paul several times, and, more important, they trust him (Phil

Philippians 1:1-2

[1]Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:
[2]Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2:22). In times of insecurity and intimidation by the Roman authorities, trust is vital (1:28). Timothy will soon return to visit the Philippians, maybe after Paul's defense before the tribunal (2:23).

Paul and Timothy call themselves "slaves" (δοῦλοι) of Christ Jesus. This title is very suggestive in a "kyriarchal"[1] society based on slave labor because women and men slaves were considered to be property of their owners and not actual persons. It is suggestive, above all, for the context of Philippi, a Roman colony containing many free inhabitants who enjoy the prestige of Roman citizenship. An intratextual examination reveals that the letter has more coherence if the term δοῦλοι is read literally as "slave" rather than as "servant of God," the honorific title that was assigned to the prophets. The reason is that the Divine took the form of a slave (Phil 2:7) in solidarity with humanity, especially with those who suffered the most discrimination. Paul and Timothy take on this image not to bow their head before the empire but to reject the lordship of the emperor and to affirm the sovereignty of the Divine, who is in solidarity with all slaves. In this letter, Paul totally relativizes his privileges, both his Jewish culture (3:4-7) and the Graeco-Roman culture of his Diasporic upbringing. To be in prison and to be a slave represents a double humiliation in the opinion of free persons. Nevertheless, it seems that for Paul it is a reason to be proud of his solidarity with the Divine.

It is significant that Paul the prisoner presents himself here as a slave and not as an apostle like he did in other letters (Gal 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Rom 1:1). This indicates that his discourse should not be read as a political or social hierarchy or a religious one but should be read as an indication that his authority comes from his vulnerability: a prisoner

1. A term that goes beyond patriarchy, including all systems of oppression and discrimination. It was coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). See p. 1 n. 1.

who voluntarily takes on the title of slave. Paul's discourse points to two conditions: one is political (the prison) and the other is social (slavery). The absence of the title "apostle" implies the absence of religious hierarchy, indicating in this letter that authority comes from below. However, if these conditions are read hierarchically from the perspective of feminism and gender, it is true that androcentrism and patriarchy are not overcome. Patriarchy permeates all social levels and all political and religious positions. Paul, the leader of the movement of the Resurrected One, also participates in the ideology of patriarchy, as I shall show in some parts of his discourse.

Paul calls recipients of the letter "the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi" (Phil 1:1). "Saints in Christ" means that they are people who have rejected the values of Roman society. They have joined the movement of Christ Jesus Resurrected. Though the term "saints" (ἁγίοις) is masculine, it included the women who probably comprised the majority of the Philippian community, including the leaders, as I pointed out in the introduction. Curiously, Paul explicitly says "to *all*" the saints. To say "the saints" would have been sufficient, but Paul wants to underline "all" of them. It is probable that the reiteration of "all" had to do with explicitly including the women leaders in the opening salutation, as I show below. "Who are" (οὖσιν) is also an ample term: it can refer to any who reside in Philippi even if they come from other cities and are not necessarily citizens of Philippi. Certainly the Christian community included citizens, free residents, slaves, women, and men, but probably fewer Romans than Greeks.[2]

The community that received the letter also included leaders called supervisors or bishops (ἐπίσκοποι) and deacons or servers (διάκονοι). These terms may allude to specific functions, but this is not clear. In secular writings these are not technical terms but rather refer to those who supervise money and tutors. According to Bonnie Bowman Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, secular use of "supervisor" refers to a commissioner of a new colony. The root of ἐπίσκοπος is "visit," and the term denotes "supervisor" in nonbiblical Greek.[3] During Paul's time, ecclesiastical structures were not yet formed in a monarchic manner as happened in the second century and beyond. In the majority of cases, bishops and

2. Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61.

3. Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 10 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 46.

deacons were simply part of the community and not placed over the community.[4] Notice the plural of the first term, which means a group of supervisors that could include both women and men to fulfill the tasks. According to Carolyn Osiek, presbyters and bishops were probably synonymous. There were many women presbyters and deacons.[5] Although they seem to be in high official positions of leadership, in practice they had certain specific tasks. Possibly the bishops took care of and supervised the community in general. The deacons helped with or carried out concrete tasks, including managing the finances.[6]

The masculine gender of the Greek words (ἐπίσκοποι, διάκονοι) does not eliminate the possibility that women could be charged with these tasks. The term διάκονοι indicates a function; it is grammatically masculine because of the androcentric nature of the Greek language. Biblical evidence for the word's inclusive significance is found in Rom 16:1, where the masculine singular διάκονος refers to a woman named Phoebe. In the particular case of Philippians, the arguments that the majority of the deacons (and supervisors) were probably women are convincing. The case of Lydia is not the only one. As the founder of the community in Philippi (Acts 16:13-15, 40), she hosted the communal meetings of the movement of the Resurrected One, and that would involve serving the group in many ways. Euodia and Syntyche, two women mentioned by name, are also recognized as important leaders (4:3). They were coworkers of Paul, who assisted him in the arduous work of spreading the message of Jesus the Resurrected One. The feminist hermeneutical lens magnifies the leadership of the women when they are mentioned by name because this upends common practice in the androcentric language in which the Bible is written.[7]

Paul rarely includes church leaders in his greetings; he has not done so in any other letter. Open letters are usually addressed to the community in general. This fact has implications from various perspectives. First, leadership is seen as a service to the community and not as a hierarchical position because these positions are mentioned only as part of the col-

4. Gordon D. Fee, *Comentario de la Epístola a los Filipenses*, Colección teológica contemporánea, trans. Dora González and Ismael López (Barcelona: CLIE, 2004), 137.

5. Carolyn Osiek, "Philippians," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, Vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 43–57.

6. Ibid.

7. Ivoni Richter Reimer, "Recordar, transmitir, actuar: Mujeres en los comienzos del cristianismo," *RIBLA* 22 (1966): 43–57.

lective group of recipients, "all the saints who are in Philippi." Furthermore, they are mentioned only after that main designation simply by means of a prepositional phrase: "with [σύν] the bishops and deacons."[8] Second, for some reason Paul wants persons who function as leaders to pay special attention to what he has to say to the group. Third, in his letter Paul goes on to insist on maintaining unity and remaining firm during these times of hostility; consequently it is important that there is harmony between the community and its leaders, as well as within the group of leaders. In his letter he points to certain disagreements (2:14; 4:3) that disrupt the internal unity needed for the whole group to confront hostility from the outside.

The letter's greeting is also intercultural because, as is commonly known, Paul combines the conventional Greek greeting, "grace," with the conventional Jewish greeting, "peace." The Greek salutation, Χαῖρε, which literally means "be joyful," is changed by giving it a theological turn to "grace" (χάρις). In spite of being a typical Pauline greeting, in this letter εἰρήνη (*shalom*, "peace") becomes relevant for Philippi because of the community's need for joy, grace, and peace. They need joy because the community is too anxious about Paul's situation in prison and the illness of Epaphroditus (Phil 2:16). They need grace from the Divine because women leaders who are concerned for their community and who have worked hard along with Paul in his evangelistic outreach need the confidence and rest that the Divine gives. And they need the social wellness of *shalom*, because they have scarce resources.[9] Besides all of this, there are both internal (4:3) and external tensions (1:28).

In the attributes Paul gives to the Divine and to Jesus Christ (Phil 1:2), we find patriarchal theological language. The Divine is Father, not Mother, and Jesus is the Lord, not a slave. Nevertheless, we can reread these terms in a political and dialectical manner. Paul presents himself as a slave, and the Divine incarnated takes the form of a slave in order to find strength in the midst of vulnerability. But within the imperial context, this internalized power is not sufficient; power from above is also needed. In this sense we can see the Divine as Father-God; the emperor cannot claim the role of *paterfamilias* to humanity. The same can be said for the title Lord: Jesus is the Lord, not the emperor, even when he is acclaimed as κύριος, "lord." The unfolding of the identities of the

8. Fee, *Comentario*, 113.
9. Oakes, *Philippians*, 55–76.

Divine as powerful in some cases and weak in others is valid if they are seen as being in solidarity with the oppressed. However, those identities can be dangerous and oppressive if they are applied without taking into account the patriarchal context in which they arise.

Thankfulness and Prayer (1:3-11)

Philippians 1:3-11 is a prayer that expresses thanks to the Divine and remembrance of the Philippian community. The semantic domain of the word μνείᾳ, "remembrance" (and μνημονεύω, "to remember"), encompasses not only the act of remembering but also the act of mentioning someone in prayer.[10] Prayer is a recurrent personal act for prisoners and a source of energy for survival. The inclusion of a prayer in this particular letter goes beyond the simple formality of many of the Pauline letters. Two moments can be distinguished: thanksgiving for solidarity and prayer for an increase in love, discernment, and the practice of justice.

Thanksgiving for the Solidarity of the Companions in Philippi (1:3-8)

The section on thanksgiving is very emotional and portrays a political prisoner who strongly maintains his ideals. What seems at first to be a common characteristic of the epistles of Paul becomes a strong introduction to the central topics of the letter. While thanksgiving passages commonly contain recurring themes, this time, because of the ambiguous grammatical structure, there are many meanings that require the readers to produce and not simply consume the text's meaning. As Umberto Eco notes, a text is an open work with multiple entrances.[11] Through thanksgiving and prayer, we hear echoes or reminiscences of other parts of the body of the letter. It is not important whether the letter was written in one piece or in three because of this interpretive move from intertextual to intratextual analysis.

Instead of presenting a problem, the ambiguity of the Greek syntax adds to the meaning. In Phil 1:3, Paul gives thanks to the Divine "at every remembrance of you." The translations are inclined to consider Paul as an active agent, since each time Paul remembers the sisters of Philippi, he gives thanks to the Divine. But it is also possible that Paul gives thanks because his companions in Philippi remember him. The

10. J. P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds, "μνημονεύω," in *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999).

11. Umberto Eco, *Obra abierta*, trans. Roser Berdague (Barcelona: Ariel, 1979).

Philippians 1:3-8

[3]I thank my God every time I remember you, [4]constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, [5]because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. [6]I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. [7]It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. [8]For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

grammatical structure allows for both translations. Another fact is that the sisters in Philippi felt Paul was very present to them, so they sent him money so he could survive (4:10-19). It is difficult for a prisoner to hide his happiness at discovering that someone remembers him and knows he lives in very unfavorable conditions. This joy appears in all contemporary prison letters.

In Phil 1:7-8, close friendship is even more explicitly addressed, though different terminology is used. Again the ambiguity of the grammatical structure represents both parties as agents. Who keeps whom in their heart? The phrase to "hold me in your heart" (1:7) could mean "I think about you Philippians all the time" or "we Philippians think about you, Paul, all the time." The translations and the commentaries are divided; some suggest that Paul is doing the holding and others that the Philippi community is doing it. I suggest, however, that the ambiguity indicates that the relationship is one of mutual friendship, independent of gender, whether read from one side or the other. This is the game that texts play with their readers.

In Phil 1:8, it is clear that Paul is the agent of deep love, saying literally that he is "craving in the gut." In the Hellenistic period, the Greek term for "gut" (σπλάγχνον) indicated the place where people soften and also where discouragement happened. The "gut" is also the privileged place for maternal love and for feelings in general.[12] From a biblical anthropological perspective, feelings that are in the "gut" are also in the uterus. In this way, Paul is speaking as a woman, a mother, and a friend who cares for his loved ones and is concerned about them. But again, the text surprises us with the genitive because it speaks about the "gut" of Jesus

12. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Diccionario Exegético del Nuevo Testamento, Vol II,* trans. Constantino Ruiz-Garrido (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1996), 1471.

Christ. Love, then, gets some embodiment. It is the "gut" of Jesus Christ that Paul incarnates, together with his longing to be in communion with (συγκοινωνός) his sisters from Philippi. In this passage, Paul is pointing out that it was Jesus, the Christ, who first led him, as Saul, to discover love as a totally different way of life from that of violently persecuting the followers of Jesus. In this way, Jesus himself brought Paul into the movement of the Resurrected One. In Phil 1:8, Paul's longing affection is expressed in a solemn way by making the Divine a witness.

True communion between the sisters in Philippi and the prisoner Paul can be seen throughout the letter. Communion does not favor any active agent, nor is it reduced to the masculine-feminine binary. Those in Philippi remember him and he them. They carry him in their hearts and he them. This situation makes more bearable both Paul's life deprived of liberty and the lives of the Philippians who experience intimidation. This communion is expressed here by the term κοινωνία, which is a result of their being united in the common cause of spreading the gospel (Phil 1:5, 7), a commitment that led Paul to suffer imprisonment and led the believers in Philippi to suffer overt hostility. For Veronica Koperski, "the relationship between Paul and the community at Philippi was unique insofar as the apostle not only 1) gives evidence of their good qualities and his and their mutual affection, but also because 2) he consistently addresses them in terms of equal to equal, and 3) he is willing to accept financial assistance from them without fear of compromising himself due to 4) the special relationship of κοινωνία, which the Philippians share with him as no other community does."[13]

Besides giving thanks to the Divine for being able to count on these companions who are also comrades in the struggle (Phil 4:3), Paul prays for them all the time (1:4). What more could a prisoner do? In extremely adverse situations of physical and legal impotence, sometimes the only weapon a prisoner has is prayer. In these contexts prayer can be very powerful, even when there is no immediate response. Karl Gaspar, a Filipino political prisoner, describes the miserable space in the prison in which he found himself, concluding with, "In the end it was my prayers, my fasting, and meditation that rescued me and restored my sense of personal dignity."[14] Paul did not feel alone in prison because he was able

13. Veronica Koperski, *The Knowledge of Christ Jesus My Lord: The High Christology of Philippians 3:7-11*, CBET (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 79.

14. Karl Gaspar, *How Long? Prison Reflections of Karl Gaspar*, ed. Helen Graham and Breda Noonan (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1985), 12.

to evoke the solidarity of his friends. He felt the companionship and friendship not only of Timothy and Epaphroditus but also of the Divine, with whom he conversed in prayer to ask for protection and give thanks.

In Phil 1:4 the word "plea" (δέησις) occurs twice, and the topic of "happiness" or "joy" (χαρά) is introduced. It is reiterated sixteen times in the letter, a redundancy that clarifies the meaning of the text. Normally joy and celebration correspond naturally, especially when there is good news. But for a prisoner awaiting the death sentence, sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness are expected. In the letter to the Philippians this is not the case. The prisoner does not consider himself a criminal but instead someone involved in a movement for which he is willing to give his life. This kind of prisoner experiences a power that comes from faith and allows him not to succumb to despair. There are three features that can be observed in the letters of prisoners who have faith of some kind, especially contemporary political prisoners: (1) the inner strength achieved by ideological convictions; (2) the joy in any unusual little thing in prison, such as a ray of sunshine, for example, or chocolates that were brought by a family member or friend, and especially the news received from their loved ones; and (3) continuing concern for their loved ones, whether family members, friends, or colleagues in the same movement. In the presence of supporters, the prisoner feels a need to show his strong side of happiness and joy. Hence the tendency to repeat "Rejoice," "I'm fine," "Don't worry about me," "I feel free."

On April 30, 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from Tegel Prison: "during these weeks it will be necessary to have a great inner strength."[15] Later, on May 19, 1944, from the same prison he wrote: "I cannot possibly describe to you the joy that your visit has caused me. . . . I regretted very much causing you alarm and I was surprised you were here, and breathed with gratitude and relief when I received your call."[16] And in many places in his letters he is very grateful for the little things that were brought to him, as is stated in this letter: "every week I receive from you the most beautiful food. . . . Is there much hunger among you? That would be terrible! As for me I do not need anything except all of you."[17] Rosa Luxemburg, socialist activist of Polish-Jewish origin, was imprisoned for her ideas in 1915. She described the prison where she was

15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistencia y sumisión: Cartas y apuntes desde el cautiverio*, trans. Constantino Ruiz-Garrido (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2008), 149.

16. Ibid., 169.

17. Ibid., 83.

held in Breslau in a letter to her friend Sophie Liebknecht on the night of December 24, 1917: "Here I am quiet and alone, enveloped in multiple layers of black darkness, of the boredom of captivity in wintertime; and in these moments my heart beats with a strange and indefinable internal happiness, as if I were walking amid the rays of a brilliant sun in a field of flowers. And in the darkness I smile at life, as if I had a magic secret that could refute everything bad, everything sad, and convert it into an abundance of light and happiness."[18]

In Phil 1:4, Paul prays for his companions with joy. The context evokes the communion among himself, his companions, and the Divine. Most of all, the text evokes the happiness Paul finds in the fact that he is able to count on them.

Paul's reasons for giving thanks are shown in Phil 1:5 and 7. The two verses are about the participation (κοινωνία) of the sisters in the movement at Philippi, first in relation to the gospel (1:5) and then in relation to those things that held them back. The use of the word κοινωνία in the two cases is significant. Paul gives thanks to the Divine for the involvement of his companions in the movement of the Resurrected One, that is, the gospel, because, as I pointed out in the introduction, the gospel is the proclamation of the Crucified and Risen One who invites us all to new life and a new way of living. Participation of women and men in the movement had been constant since these people heard of it through Paul when he first visited the city of Philippi. It continued until the date when the letters were written. But Paul does not want to claim that it is thanks to him that these women are in the movement; rather, he says that their active and effective participation has been the work of the Divine (1:6) who accompanies them in practice so that their good work can be effective and brought to perfection at the end of time. The "day of Jesus Christ" (1:6) is how the gospels refer to the coming of the reign of the Divine in its fullness, a utopia where there will be no more violence against women and no more racism, classism, homophobia, or persecution for being different.

The second reason for gratitude is given in Phil 1:7: the partnership or solidarity (συγκοινωνός) of the Philippians with Paul in his chains (δεσμοῖς). This solidarity includes the defense of his case before the court and the appropriate testimony or confirmation that what he says about the gospel is true. The term "defense" (ἀπολογία) is a legal term, and "con-

18. Jörn Schütrumpf, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg o el precio de la libertad* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Berlin, 2007), 59.

firmation" (βεβαίωσις) is not only the positive presentation of the evidence of truth but the confirmation of a statement given.[19] "Defense" (ἀπολογία) can also be used without the connotation of jurisprudence in the sense that the Philippians participated in the defense and confirmation of the gospel before Paul was taken prisoner. Since in Phil 1:5 Paul has already spoken of their partnership with the gospel, it is more likely that 1:7 refers here to his court case. He has to prepare his defense (2:23) because he is awaiting trial. Apparently the community has closely followed Paul's case, and they are active in the whole process. Solidarity, then, is not only the provision of specific support (4:10-19) but something additional that makes the community at Philippi suspect under Roman justice. They are seen as complicit because of their communion with the gospel, the same cause that put Paul in prison. Clearly, this kind of close relationship could put Paul's partners in Philippi at risk.

As noted above, the two reasons for giving thanks both use the Greek term (κοινωνία/συγκοινωνός) for communion. This communion is something that manifests itself in concrete actions. For example, the term is also used for an offering, as seen in Phil 4:14 and in other letters that talk about the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:4). Paul sees what he is going through now as a moment of "grace" (χάρις). This means that he does not consider it shameful to be in prison, as it would be according to the values of Roman society. Perhaps he considered imprisonment to be a privilege because he sees on his body the wounds of Jesus (3:10) and wants to preach with his body. But this interpretation is dangerous for modern readers because it masks what his physical situation really is: an injustice that should be denounced.

Another topic present in the thanksgiving and repeated throughout the letter is expressed by the term φρονέω, "to think" or "reflect" in a practical way (Phil 1:7).[20] This word occurs ten times, indicating that it is an important term to be taken into account. Semantically it can mean different things. Here it means "to think" or "feel something" for others. "It is right," Paul says, "for me to think this way about all of you (Phil 1:7). "This" refers to everything he says to his sisters in 1:3-6.

19. Angela Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt eines Gefangenen: Die Kommunikationsstruktur des Philipperbriefs im Spiegel seiner Abfassungssituation," *NovT* 55 (2013): 151.

20. Stephen Fowl, "Christology and Ethics in Philippians 2:5-11," in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 145–48.

Prayer That They May Have More Love, Discernment, and Practice of Justice (1:9-11)

In Phil 1:9-11, the reasons for this prayer emerge more directly. In 1:3-4, Paul gives thanks to the Divine every time he remembers his companions in Philippi, and he prays for them continually, that they would have good health and be protected, because they were very committed to the gospel. Now, in the second part of the thanksgiving, he explicitly mentions the reasons for his prayer and divides them into three important areas for those involved in the movement of the Resurrected One: (1) love (ἀγάπη); (2) knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις, αἴσθησις, δοκιμάζω, διαφέρω); and (3) the practice of justice (δικαιοσύνη). In 1:5, Paul gives thanks to the Divine for their partnership in the cause of the gospel.

Being in partnership is, however, just one side of the coin; it is not enough. This commitment must also be expressed concretely, above all, in contexts of repression and persecution. Paul's companions in the movement have shown this because the letter itself mentions their economic support for the prisoner as a concrete manifestation, the fruit of the ethics of justice and care. Paul's prayer is that the love they have for each other may increase "more and more in knowledge and full insight" (1:9). One would expect Paul to pray that this love may abound more and more in good works or in acts of justice (1:11), but interestingly, he emphasizes the importance of the cognitive dimension in the practice of justice and links this closely to the action of loving. He uses four terms from the cognitive domain: "knowledge" and "insight" as well as testing things out well in order to "determine" what is truly valuable. This strongly suggests that Paul is praying for his companions to have greater understanding of the implications of their participation in the movement of the Resurrected One. Discernment is essential in a society where values are turned upside down, where "wickedness and injustice suppress the truth," as Paul outlines in Rom 1:18. Also, when people engage in countercultural movements, they need to have a clear understanding of the situation so as not to act naively.

For example, people who do not share the values of the community of the Resurrected One could see Paul's imprisonment as shameful. A person who does not understand or does not have discernment cannot define things very well or choose what is truly worthwhile. Social scientists maintain that reality is opaque and engaging reality requires the knowledge and insight that comes from analysis. In imperial times the propaganda about peace (*pax*) was very appealing. Could it be possible

Philippians 1:9-11

[9]And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight [10]to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, [11]having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

that some preachers in the Roman Empire believed the emperor's "gospel" that he was a savior, lord, and prince of peace, while at the same time proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ? This is a remote possibility for followers of Jesus at that time. This could be an explanation for why Paul was so insistent that they see Jesus as Lord and Savior. The behavior of members of the movement could be influenced by the values of Greco-Roman society that privileged power and status rather than those who "came not to be served, but to serve," as Jesus put it in Mark 10:41-45.

Participating in the movement of the Resurrected One requires coherence between thinking and doing, producing actions motivated by love, justice, and care for one another. In this way there is transparency and sincerity (εἰλικρινής), and no harm is done to anyone (ἀπρόσκοπος). In addition, the result will be visible: good works of justice produced by those who participate in the movement. In short, everything is interwoven: the practice of justice (δικαιοσύνη) cannot happen without love because when the pursuit of justice departs from the ethics of care and merciful love, violence results. Yet love cannot arise without knowledge and discernment because it may end up being ineffective. These are the attitudes and actions that will be judged by the Divine at the end of time, in the Day of Judgment (Matt 25:31-46; Rom 2:16). Eschatological justice must be something important to the prisoner because "the day of Christ" is mentioned twice (1:6, 10) in this short section. Solidarity and commitment here on earth is what glorifies and praises the Divine (1:11).

Power Relations from a Feminist Perspective (1:9-11)

In Phil 1:3-8, we saw that the relationship between Paul and his female companions in Philippi was a relation of surprising equality. The ambiguity of the syntax reinforces this egalitarian communion. The women are not seen as benefactors of Paul the apostle, nor did Paul view them from a top-down perspective. Yet in 1:9-11, when Paul prays for them,

his role as a leader comes out, since it is unlikely that they would pray for Paul like he prays for them, suggesting that his love should display knowledge and discernment or that his actions should become genuine, irreproachable, and filled with the fruits of righteousness. They could not speak so frankly on a horizontal plane to a man they knew as an apostle. Power relations leaned toward the leader. Members of a movement could pray among themselves for their leader, but it is doubtful that they could tell him directly what they thought he needed to do. In 1:9-11, Paul is definitely the leader, even though he does not use the title apostle here, and the reader senses his authority over the community. But that is typical of a leader in a traditional leader-movement paradigm. This patriarchal language commonly used among men also appears in Frei Betto's letter when he says that Paul is the cornerstone of the Philippian community who wants to perpetuate himself through them.

What is rather surprising is the tone of communion in 1:3-8. Is this communitarian tone simply the result of the rhetoric in Paul's thanksgiving that is aimed at earning the goodwill of his readers? Or does it mean that, if authority comes from a prisoner slave, as Paul represents himself, traditional hierarchical rules need to be rethought? As leaders in their communities who have not been imprisoned but nonetheless suffer the hostility of Roman religious policy, the readers at Philippi naturally pray for Paul, probably saying, "stand firm," "the Divine is with you," "persevere to the end," "don't get involved in the common practice of corruption in prisons." As Neila Serrano de Barragán says in the interview about her experience in prison, "Money is the most important thing. Lawyers need to be paid and discovering the truth must be paid for with money."[21]

News from Prison (1:12-26)

After the greetings and words of thanks, the first thing that generally follows in a Pauline letter is information about the situation of the sender, usually saying something like "thanks to the Divine I am fine; do not worry about me." In the case of this letter, Paul says the same thing but not in relation to himself and his poor conditions—he leaves that to second place—but in relation to the cause of the Resurrected One, for which he has been imprisoned. News from prison is both good and bad. On the one hand, the gospel message is becoming widely known, both inside and outside of the *praetorium*. Strangely, his chains have helped.

21. See Introduction, p. 27 above.

On the other hand, Paul's news is not so good because the prospect of his liberation from prison is unclear. Seeing the level of suffering experienced by the prisoner requires reading between the lines. Uncertainty reigns, and Paul is starting to think about the possibility of a death sentence and his attitude regarding the future verdict.

Repercussions of Imprisonment (1:12-18)

Going to jail always has negative and positive impacts, particularly when a person is imprisoned for political and ideological reasons. For example, in the case of Frei Betto, who was imprisoned by the military dictatorship (1969–1973), the church in Brazil was divided. For some, he was a young man who strayed from the faith and became involved in politics. For others, his faith was what led him to oppose the dictatorship. What these two opinions reveal is the existence of different concepts of what constitutes the gospel. The recipients of Frei Betto's letters were usually relatives, communities, or individuals who sympathized with his cause. They were anxious to receive news, they experienced the same feelings of uncertainty that prisoners did, and they saw the prisoner's situation as a very unfortunate yet heroic act. Something similar may have been happening to Paul's own reaction to being in prison.

Sharing the News about the Movement of the Resurrected One (1:12-13)

The phrase "I want you to know" is used to emphasize what the speaker is about to say. However, there is a deeper meaning. It is significant that "knowledge" was a matter of prayer in Phil 1:9 because the reiteration of cognitive verbs emphasizes what the recipients know and understand: the events that resulted in Paul's being in prison and how the plans of those who imprisoned him, in this case the Romans, were disrupted. Instead of serving as a punishment or a warning, Paul's imprisonment actually helped to spread (εἰς προκοπή) the gospel (1:12). The term προκοπή, meaning "progress," has a military connotation: the gospel, personified, advances like a squad that strikes down and removes obstacles in its way. Yet, as Joseph A. Marchal argues, military images are not helpful because they are bloody, cruel, and entail death.[22] But Paul

22. Joseph A. Marchal, *Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 50–64.

Philippians 1:12-13

[12]I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, [13]so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ.

is using the term metaphorically, if he even has the military context in mind at all. The risk is that the metaphor can lead to incorrect actions, as happened in the case of the Crusaders or the conquerors of Latin America, who used their military victories as a means to impose their religion on the vanquished.

In the case of Philippians, Paul is talking to a small political-religious movement that sought to transform human relationships and challenge people to live differently from the dominant Roman culture. To speak of the gospel in this way involves using the language of political militancy. The word "militant" is not the best term because of its reference to military force and the use of weapons, but in fact the gospel movement is a political activity, paradoxically unarmed, or rather, using other means that do not kill but have the ability to save lives. What Paul does in this case is use the military metaphors against the military, but without weapons.

For example, in Eph 6:10-17, Jesus' followers are presented with the image of a uniform of an anti-Roman soldier, where the belt is the truth, the breastplate is the garment of justice, the sandals are peace, and the sword is the Word of life. In prison, Paul lives in a military context because he is chained to soldiers twenty-four hours a day; the soldiers change according to the four turns laid out in Roman imperial rules for the changing of the guard.[23] It is true that there is an anti-imperial logic in many of the texts of the New Testament, and this produces conflict between two powers, two masters, two rescuers, two princes of peace, and two kingdoms. The problem comes when later readers take another step with Paul's logic and talk about other situations involving two armies and two empires as if Paul's logic applied there too. While readers can point to two armies in this letter—contrasting the Roman army with the movement's "army" of believers—there are not actually two empires in this letter, since the Divine Reign is by definition anti-imperial.

23. Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 46.

In the story of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2, Jesus is called Lord and Savior, and in the sky an "army" of heavenly hosts appears to a few shepherds, announcing peace on earth through a baby laid in a box of straw intended for the animals of a peasant family's dwelling. The source of power in the two lords, Roman and Christian, is distinct: The lordship of one is destined to serve others, as seen in his solidarity with people who are dispossessed and discriminated against. In contrast, for the other self-designated lord, power is for dominating others, especially the powerless, and requiring them to serve him. Therefore, it is important to realize that Paul's strength comes from the Crucified One, "the slave" (2:7-8). This is the key to understanding Paul's strength and the spread of the gospel among the soldiers guarding him.

The advance of the gospel occurs because the soldiers who guard the *praetorium* and other residents of the palace (Phil 1:13) know that Paul is in prison not for any criminal matter but for the gospel. Apparently it has made an impact on the soldiers that someone like Paul is suffering in chains because he believes that a person who was crucified as a traitor was vindicated when the Divine raised him from the dead. Whether or not Paul deliberately used the expression "in [ἐν] Christ" in 1:13 rather than the more common "for [ὑπερ] Christ," the ambiguity of this discourse saturates the senses. While Paul wears chains because of Christ, it can also be true that these chains mean that Paul is in tune with the suffering of Christ. The pain from the handcuffs could move this chained prisoner to enter into communion with the wounds of the Crucified One, enabling Christ himself to become evident in Paul's tortured body. With his chained body and probably also with his words, Paul became a herald of the Word in prison. So imprisonment, which was intended to bring about a bad result for the gospel and for Paul, actually turned out to be something positive because it helped spread the cause that both Paul and his companions were committed to. The spread of the gospel did not take place due to influences from some Roman citizen sympathizer but because of Paul's adversity itself.

The comparison of the gospel proclaimed by Paul in prison to a "Trojan Horse" within the governor's residence or palace is not the best analogy.[24] In Homer's story, soldiers were hidden inside the horse. Once the "gift" was inside the city walls, they jumped out of the horse, killed the guards, and opened the city gates to the Greek army that immediately

24. J. L. Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, PNTC (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 58.

invaded and killed everyone in the city. The image alludes to a deceptive infiltration in order to triumph over another people. Paul does not deceive people about why he is in prison: he is there because of his faith, and this faith does not allow him to deny the gospel as required by the Roman Empire or to accept a way of life contrary to the lifestyle proclaimed in the gospel.

Announcing the Gospel with Valor, without Fear (1:14-18b)

Paul's chains also impacted followers of the movement in the city where he was imprisoned in Ephesus (or Rome) and inspired them to spread the good news about the Resurrected One. Paul uses several terms that indicate the repressive context in which those involved in this movement lived. He tells his companions to be "confident" (πεποιθότας), "daring" (τολμᾶν), and "fearless" (ἀφόβως) about speaking the Word (Phil 1:14). With these three words Paul makes it clear that the repression was cruel. I infer from this that before Paul became a prisoner, people were afraid to speak out, as happens regularly in contexts of persecution. Because they feared violence from the empire, members of the movement lacked confidence, as well as courage or audacity, to act in ways that might bring them harm or opposition. So what was motivating the communities around Paul to spread the gospel now? According to Paul it was "my imprisonment" (δεσμοῖς, 1:14), the fact that he had been arrested and chained and was ready to defend the cause of the gospel in Roman courts. In other words, Paul attributes their courage to his own testimony.

Those receiving the letter were relieved to know that Paul was doing well, but what was important to his companions in the movement in the city around him was that Paul's imprisonment gave them courage to continue to withstand the suffering that was inflicted on them because of "their lack of loyalty to the emperor."[25] The participants in the movement who preached the gospel boldly called themselves sisters and brothers to indicate that they were part of the movement of the Resurrected One. Apparently this group represented a trend within the movement, different from others in the movement who Paul thought proclaimed the gospel because of inferior motives (Phil 1:15, 17).

The chiasmus in Phil 1:15-17 helps us observe the contrasting profiles of the two groups: the supporters of Paul and those who did not support him.

25. Fee, *Comentario*, 166.

Philippians 1:14-18b

[14]and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

[15]Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. [16]These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; [17]the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. [18]What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

A non-supporter v. 15a (envy, rivalry)

B supporter v. 15b (goodwill)

B' supporter v. 16 (love)

A' non-supporter v. 17 (selfish ambition, not sincere)

According to Paul, the brothers who disagreed with him were jealous, and their proclamation of the gospel was done in an effort to cause a row (ἔρις). Additionally, they were not honest, as they put their personal interests first. Paul sees supporters as those who are motivated by goodwill because their proclamation is inspired by love. The terms "envy" and "rivalry" are idiomatic expressions that occur frequently in discussions within liberation movements. Ἔρις, according to John Reumann, relates especially to political strife and a recognized topic within the dissensions.[26] Therefore the important thing here is to analyze the problem of division using the epithets Paul applies to groups that do not think as he does.

The text is not clear regarding a political reason for the enmity, but it probably has to do with Paul's situation in prison and possibly with the Roman authorities. Paul's supporters agree that he is in prison due to his mission of proclaiming the gospel. Non-supporters of Paul possibly resent that he is in prison, and they probably say so when they proclaim the gospel. However, even these people do not make a proclamation lightly; they also "dare" to proclaim it (1:14). Perhaps for them, being imprisoned is not an honor. Paul believes that they think or imagine (οἰόμενοι) that they add to his oppression (θλῖψις), increasing his pain

26. John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 200.

in prison. When Paul says they think they "increase" his oppression, he implies that he suffers just like any other prisoner (1:17); he does not say this explicitly because he usually does not like to talk about his sufferings. The non-supporters probably belong to one of the non-Pauline trends found in non-Pauline texts, such as the Johannine writings or Jewish-Christian literature.[27] In the city where Paul was a prisoner, there were certainly diverse and controversial ways of seeing, proclaiming, and living the gospel.

Frei Betto interprets this enmity between Paul and others who proclaim Christ in a different way. One of the points he makes in his introduction to his letter to me is that "Paul is a competitor. He wants the best and will not allow anyone else to sow or to reap his harvest (1:17-19)." While we do not know whether Frei Betto sees Paul's competitiveness as positive or negative or simply as something he perceives in the letter, Paul's competitiveness is, in my view, a sexist and patriarchal attitude.

Paul recognizes the plurality of positions in the movement. The participants are called sisters and brothers, and most of them boldly proclaim the gospel. Here, Paul is right; what really matters is not a parade of personal accomplishments but the cause itself; that is what motivates the struggle (1:17). The spread of the gospel both inside and outside the prison brings joy to the prisoner (1:18). This is a joy that helps him stand firm in the face of adversity. This is also good news for his female companions who are part of the same movement.

Between Life and Death (1:18c-26)

In Phil 1:18c-26, the prisoner speaks about himself. He needs to be careful and measure his words because of his status as a prisoner and also because of the emperor's spy network (see my Introduction).

Political prisoners know that their loved ones are extremely concerned about their personal situation in prison. A prisoner's family, friends, and companions want to know if he or she is being mistreated, has enough to eat, and is sad. The supporters actually take risks going from one office to another to inquire about a prisoner's present and future situation, looking for people with influence to help. If the supporters are highly committed to or engaged in the movement, they avoid being arrested by sending others in their place to find out about the status of the prisoner.

27. Ibid., 202.

Philippians 1:18c-26

18 Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,
19 for I know that through your prayers
and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ
this will turn out for my deliverance. 20 It
is my eager expectation and hope that I
will not be put to shame in any way, but
that by my speaking with all boldness,
Christ will be exalted now as always in
my body, whether by life or by death.
21 For to me, living is Christ and dying
is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that
means fruitful labor for me; and I do not
know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed
between the two: my desire is to depart
and be with Christ, for that is far better;
24 but to remain in the flesh is more nec-
essary for you. 25 Since I am convinced
of this, I know that I will remain and con-
tinue with all of you for your progress
and joy in faith, 26 so that I may share
abundantly in your boasting in Christ
Jesus when I come to you again.

The prisoner knows this, and because of this, even if he or she is suffering torture or going through hardships, he or she will tell family and friends that everything is okay, do not worry, everything will be fine, be content, I am happy. Communication with members of the movement may vary slightly. The prisoner will still not talk much about the details of his or her personal situation, like the lack of food, and will relativize the torture. He or she will speak, if cautiously, about the gospel as a resistance movement and about the hope that the cause they are fighting for will be made known to all people. Prisoners say firmly that the Divine is with them, suffers with them, and struggles alongside them. Exhortations are directed to the recipients of letters and messages to encourage them to take care of each other at the same time that they continue to stand firm in their convictions. Death is a theme for almost all political prisoners. The tone is usually not one of resignation but of courage: even when faced with death, I will not give up. Nelson Mandela wrote in April 1964: "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African People. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."[28]

In prison, it is a common occurrence that political prisoners become more radical despite their powerlessness, because death for them is no

28. Nelson Mandela Foundation, *A Prisoner in the Garde*n: *Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive*, 1964 (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2005), 66–67.

longer a major concern. The fundamental thing is the project of greater liberation to which they have dedicated their lives. When they are alone, the possibility of death often enters their heads, especially when they see their companions die in prison. They also plan for the future, even though they see no sign of being released. All of these ideas come and go because time has stopped, the space they are allowed is limited, anything new is outside the prison, and managing their own time inside becomes difficult. The arrival of letters or visitors provides a momentary break in the passage of time in prison. Different thoughts usually come and go, without order, but when prisoners write, they do so with much care. They avoid describing the reality of prison life, trying to cause the least amount of worry for the recipients of their letters and of course taking into account the censorship to which letters from prison are subjected. It is likely that Paul also lived through many experiences like these.

The Longing of a Prisoner (1:18c-20)

Paul does not speak in the present tense in the letter. He feels it could produce anxiety in his companions in Philippi because, emotionally, they will enter into his present experiences as he recounts them in the letter. When speaking in the past tense, about events that had taken place, Paul's narratives are peaceful, even though they are also somber.[29] Paul used the present tense in the previous section where he was talking about the spread of the gospel in order to cheer, comfort, and encourage his companions. The future does not produce anxiety for him because the events have not yet occurred, and change is always possible. But uncertainty for the future creates anxiety for the reader. When Paul chooses the future tense, he handles it in such a way that he creates a sense of hope and security. Although he is speaking about the possibility of his death, he does so with serenity, like many political prisoners do. Paul speaks with conviction in this section. To begin with, he uses the word "rejoice," but in the future tense: "I will continue to rejoice" for what is to come, possibly at short notice (Phil 1:18c).

The first reason for his joy is his possible release. The term σωτηρία encompasses the religious sense of "salvation" along with the secular sense of "liberation." Although the soteriological sense is possible, here Paul is talking about himself as a prisoner who is in the process of preparing

29. Emile Benveniste, *Problemas de lingüística general*, trans. Juan Almela (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1971), 176.

his defense for court and who hopes to be liberated so that he can visit his companions (Phil 1:26). They are praying for him (1:19), not for him to be saved, but to win his case and be released. He believes in the power of their prayers and in the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who has been provided to him (ἐπιχορηγία) by the Divine. Therefore he claims that he knows (οἶδα) that his release will take place. It is like saying to them, "So, please don't worry about me; the Spirit of the Resurrected One is with me, and your prayers will be heard by the Divine."

A release from prison is not, however, what he most desires at the moment; instead, he wants the help of the Divine in preparing for his defense. Two strong Greek words mark his true longing and hope: ἀποκαραδοκία, a term that refers to a craving, and ἐλπίς, which indicates a hope that something beneficial awaits, therefore enabling a person to live confidently. In Phil 1:20, Paul could possibly be talking about the defense he is preparing for his upcoming trial. In his speech before the courts he will not water down the message of the gospel in order to save himself. He will speak freely and frankly (παρρησία) in public, that is, clearly, boldly, and without fear, because what he expects is that the Crucified-Resurrected One (and not Caesar) will be recognized by his audience. "In my body" (1:20) is an expression that refers to the whole being, so it can mean "in my whole being, in everything I say and do."[30] Using the passive voice (divine passive), Paul affirms that the Divine will magnify Christ. This is so because, as he states in 1:19, the Spirit of Jesus has promised to all who face interrogation in court that she will guide their response (see Mark 13:11).

Paul's hope, expressed in the negative, is that the Divine will not let him down when he is judged in court because he gives all of himself so that the Crucified and Resurrected One will be honored. Reading the text in this way, Ernst Lohmeyer is correct in saying that there are signs of a desire for martyrdom in the text.[31] Maybe not throughout the whole letter, but when it comes to his legal defense, Paul is putting his life at risk. We perceive this at the end of 1:20. It is not that he wants to die or is preparing a defense to achieve martyrdom. But the chances of being sentenced to death for his defense are very real, and he knows it. It is

30. I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1977), 30.

31. Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, Kolosser und an Philemon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964), 17–38.

like hearing him say, "Whether I end up alive or dead, I'm not backing down on my commitment to the movement of the Resurrected One."

It is impossible not to hear echoes of Job 13:16, as several commentaries have noted. Although the character in Job is not in chains, rhetorically he is in court. His "friends" accuse him before the Divine because, to them, he is guilty. Job appears in the court of the Divine and also expects her to hear and understand his defense. Frankly and fearlessly, Job presents his arguments that he believes will enable him to win the case. Even if he dies for it (13:15), he insists that he will not be intimidated. Charged before the Divine, Job hopes that she will vindicate him before his accusers. This intertextual parallel suggests that Paul wants to be vindicated, not only before the Roman authorities, but also before the Divine, and especially before those who, in proclaiming the gospel, criticize the fact that he is in prison (Phil 1:15-17).

Between Life and Death (1:21-24)

Like all political prisoners, Paul thinks about death. These verses have been shaped by the possibility that he might be put to death. If in Phil 1:18 Paul was anticipating his release, there is no doubt that he affirmed his liberation in order to comfort his readers and dispel their doubts about the possibility that he would be put to death. After manifesting his defense strategy, however, and presenting the gospel as it really is, quite different from the gospel of Caesar, the possibility of a death penalty could become more real. So he has to deal with this directly, balancing what could be gained and what lost. Here he has to confess his belief, maybe even to convince himself, that the verdict is not important as long as the cause of the movement wins. "For to me, living is Christ" (1:21) is easy to understand, since it implies the dedication of one's life to the cause of Christ.

However, "dying is gain" is more complex and difficult to understand (1:21). For most people, there is no gain in death except to end terrible suffering, to be released from a terminal illness, or to be released via suicide from a tormented mind. For a political prisoner, however, or really any prisoner, death can be a gain for two reasons: on the one hand, a prisoner becomes a hero or a martyr for a cause, which is a great personal satisfaction; on the other hand, as a consequence of public martyrdom, the cause will then become even more widely known and grow. When Paul speaks of death as gain, this may mean something similar in the sense that he gives his life for the cause of the movement of the Resurrected One. This is a great testimony and will help to advance the spread of the gospel. It is also an occasion of joyful anticipation (1:18c; 2:17-18).

In Phil 1:23, Paul makes clear why the gain is to die. He uses the euphemism "depart" (ἀναλῦσαι), or leaving to be with Christ. "Leaving" means to be absent from this particular world, and, according to indigenous thinking in the Americas, it involves entering another world, that of the dead. But in the biblical world of the New Testament, there is no world of the dead as understood by indigenous people. There is also no clarity in the letter about what this new way of being absent could be. While there is no talk in the letter of going to heaven to meet Christ, Paul clearly wants and considers it best for him personally to be with the One who was crucified by the Roman authorities but who was vindicated and resurrected by the Divine.

So what Paul wants is to be like Christ: absent in the flesh but present in the midst of the movement through his Spirit. Not only that but Paul's desire is to go through the same thing that Jesus went through after his death: to be vindicated by the Divine and rise again. Thus his absence will be manifest in the movement through his living presence with the Spirit of the Resurrected One. The belief that a beloved leader of a movement did not die is common in revolutionary movements. Some people say, for example, that Zapata and Pancho Villa, leaders of the Mexican Revolution, are still living today. There are myths like that of Tupac Amaru, the indigenous leader of Perú who fought against the Spanish, or Mackandal, the legendary Afro-Caribbean who led the resistance against the French. Often, people say these leaders are seen at night, or riding a white horse, or that they are embodied in free-roaming animals.

While entering the world of the dead makes sense in many cultures, it sounds strange to Western Christians. More convincing would be the "desire to be with Christ," which is another euphemism for death. It is an extension of the euphemism "leaving," giving a positive sense to "the leaving" and reiterating the affirmation that "to die is gain." On May 13, 1972, Frei Betto wrote from cell 17 in Tiradentes Prison, Brazil, that "at 6.00 am the jailer knocks on each door until the prisoner answers, to make sure he did not die during the night. . . . I spend most of the time praying. . . . I am happy to experience this level of solidarity with the hungry of the earth. I ask the Lord to give us enough strength and courage. If life is over here it was worth it."[32]

Even though it is common for political prisoners to be willing to die for their cause, it is unusual that Paul would desire martyrdom at this early

32. Frei Betto, *Cartas da prisão 1967–1973* (Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 2008), 130.

stage of the origins of Christianity because martyrdom was relatively uncommon until the second century. Perhaps, conditioned by the concern of his readers, Paul proposes that, though his condemnation to death is a possibility, if it occurs, it will be brought on by his own will and, rather than something negative, is actually a gain. In any case he is quick to say that the best alternative is not to be condemned to death but to be released. Then, alive, he can go on to make a valuable contribution and promote the work being conducted by the movement of the Resurrected One (Phil 1:22). Facing these two alternatives, both considered positive, Paul considers it preferable (ἀναγκαῖος) to live, in order to be of service to his companions in the movement in Philippi (1:24).

But nothing is decided, either on the part of the Roman authorities or from Paul's side. Paul did not know which to choose (Phil 1:22), whether to keep on living for the cause or to die. The term αἱρήσομαι, "will choose," is in first-person, future, active (deponent verb: passive form but active meaning); Paul literally states that he can choose the outcome of the trial. But the decision does not depend on him. At the trial, the judgment is made by the judges, and Paul will have to accept the outcome. Paul could have chosen suicide to fulfill his wish. Even though in antiquity prisoners did commit suicide to relieve themselves of their suffering (see my Introduction), it makes no sense to apply this to Paul. This letter does not allow for suicide because Paul's optimism permeates the letter from beginning to end, as is seen even in this section.

There are, however, two other ways of taking literally the verb where Paul is the subject agent of the decision to live or die. The key is to consider that Paul may well influence the outcome of the Roman trial depending on how he builds his defense before the court. This can be done in two ways: first, he does not defend himself or the gospel and instead remains silent.[33] This is not unreasonable, since, when Jesus was facing Pilate, he decided to remain silent when he was questioned about the accusations against him (Matt 27:12-14) and was sentenced to death on the cross.[34] This position would fit with Paul's theology of the imitation of Christ.

The other, more interesting option, which articulates better intratextually, is that he intends to set out the defense of the gospel very freely and forcefully without allowing himself to be intimidated, explaining

33. Craig S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*, JSNTSup 130 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 120–21.

34. Ibid., 122.

the principles of what it means to belong to the movement of the Resurrected One. In secular terms, Paul's rejection of imperial impositions and the deification of Caesar would be his political platform. In this case, he would be exposing himself and hastening his death. The hymn that he chooses to include in his letter (Phil 2:6-11) is a political statement that could also lead to death.[35] We wonder whether the christological hymn will form part of his defense of the gospel because that is the gospel that he will defend. Knowing that the hymn was at high risk of censorship, the inclusion of the hymn in this letter is an indication that perhaps Paul chose "to leave" prematurely, before his time.

This section is very intense and emotional, full of rhetorical devices. Apparently there is no notable thread to be followed that would help us to truly understand what the prisoner was thinking. This is very often the case in letters from contemporary political prisoners. But what is everywhere evident in Paul's letters is his total dependence on the Divine. In the jungle where she was kidnapped, Carmiña Navia Velasco gave herself to the Divine when she said, "In the darkness of the night that surrounds us, growing inside is the Divine Light that sustains our being and gives strength to our days. Surrounded by forces of nature of such intensity in the Pacific coast jungle where I was held, Wisdom and Christ become incarnate in the torrent, presenting a new face to me and etching it indelibly on my new life coming out of this experience."[36]

Joy of Being with Companions of the Movement in Philippi (1:25-26)

This section ends with news from the prison emphasizing with conviction that Paul will be released from prison and will soon be with the whole community. To make his conviction clear, Paul uses a play on words with the lemma μενῶ: in 1:24 he writes "but to remain [ἐπιμένειν] in the flesh is more necessary for you," and in 1:25 he says, "I know that I will remain [μενῶ] and continue [παραμενῶ] with all of you." He speaks so forcefully that it seems that what he said previously about death and life is consigned to the past, and he wants the readers to forget it. This

35. Angela Standhartinger, "Die paulinische Theologie im Spannungsfeld römisch-imperialer Machtpolitik: Eine neue Perspecktive auf Paulus, kritisch geprüft anhand des Philipperbrief," *Religion, Politik und Gewalt,* Kongressband des XII Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie (Berlin: Güthersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), 369–75; Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 178–84.

36. Carmiña Navia Valesco, "Unidad en un sueño común: A propósito de la carta de Pablo a las mujeres de la iglesia de Filipos," letter to the author, Cali, Colombia, March 30, 2014, 2.

manner of speaking is not alien to prisoners. At times they enter into deep discussions about death; their reflections emerge at a crucial time in prison that space, time, and solitude bring about. Then they write these thoughts in a letter, but very soon afterward they begin to speak about their future plans. At the moment Paul is concentrating on the present situation and especially on bringing hope and encouragement to the Philippians.

In these verses, Paul again takes up the theme of the "spread" (προκοπή) of the movement of the Resurrected One (Phil 1:12). Here, the "spread" of the gospel is not due only to Paul but also to the work of the whole community at Philippi, working together with him and experiencing "the joy in faith" (1:25). The phrase "spread the faith" in 1:12 is equivalent to the phrase "your progress and joy in faith" in 1:25. To be in the movement spreading the gospel together and seeing the bond that is created is a cause for rejoicing, even in the midst of the hostility suffered in Philippi, as I discuss below.

Philippians 1:26 paints a picture of Paul that looks quite arrogant to our contemporary eyes. He seems to say that, on leaving prison, he will come to Philippi with his companions, and his arrival will give them all more reasons to be proud of him (ἐν ἐμοί, "in me"). Another possible reading, somewhat softer, would be to give weight to the expression "in Christ" instead of to the phrase "in me." "In me" would relate to his release from prison and his arrival at Philippi. That is, the Philippians will feel even prouder to be in communion (in Christ) with the movement of the Resurrected One when they see Paul freed from prison. This second interpretation is more in line with what has been discussed so far. Practice often shows, however, that people in leadership positions, men and women, become arrogant. This is understandable, because leaders need to be strong in character.

Philippians 1:27–3:1

Causes, Struggles, and Plans

The Cause for Which We Struggle (1:27–2:18)

The letter to the Philippians is different from a letter written by an imprisoned criminal to family and friends whose primary concern is the prisoner's physical and legal situation. This letter addresses a community of people who are members of the same targeted movement, meaning that when the letter is sent, the recipients run the same risk as the prisoner. Of course Paul's companions in Philippi are concerned about his condition, his situation in jail, and his upcoming defense before the tribunal, but they are also concerned for the movement. Paul knows this and therefore has updated the community on the progress of his case (Phil 1:4-11) and his particular situation (1:12-26). In both sections the news from prison is intended to bring calm and lessen anxiety about the state of things in prison, even though Paul speaks with some realism due to the possibility of a death sentence. At the same time he addresses the life-changing project in which he and his companions are involved.

But the situation remains highly dangerous for the recipients, who reside in a Roman colony where a continual profession of loyalty to Caesar is required. The daily life of his companions who are embedded in a movement that proposes a new and different way of life could not have been easy for them. In this section, Paul talks about the cause they

are all fighting for and the importance of remaining firm, united with and supportive of each other, reflecting in their everyday lives the attitudes, words, and actions that herald the coming utopia, first expressed in the life of the Crucified and Resurrected One. Although he is in prison, Paul encourages the community at Philippi, using an expression that belongs to co-participants in the movement who struggle to maintain the new and different way of life taught by Jesus Christ. In other words, they are to act as citizens (πολιτεύομαι) who are guided by the values of equality, solidarity, and effective love for people who are the most vulnerable.

Since this new way of life clashes with the values of the society around them, Paul encourages them not to be intimidated but to show a united front, to stand firm, and to maintain solidarity with each other. Paul cites a hymn to Christ as the example to follow. The song describes the Divine in solidarity with people who are most discriminated against, such as slaves and those who are crucified by the Roman Empire (Phil 2:6-7). With that he demonstrates that the preferences of the Divine are not the same as those of Roman society. By the same divine will that raised the Crucified One, Christ reigns with power over all kingdoms. For this reason, no one in the movement should be intimidated by a "crooked and perverse" society (2:15) but rather should remain strong, supporting each other in unity and shining like stars in the midst of that society.

The Challenge of Living as Citizens Worthy of the Gospel (1:27-30)

With the word "alone" (μόνος) Paul emphasizes what truly matters to the participants of the movement of the Resurrected One. It was not just a matter of professing Jesus as Savior and Lord—already a risky thing to do at that time—but also of living a life that is worthy of the good news proclaimed by the movement. According to Carolyn Osiek, "They are to live as Citizens of the gospel of Christ, whether or not Paul is there to guide them. The 'gospel' here, of course, does not yet mean a written document, but the whole way of life they learned along with the proclamation of Christ in the preaching of Paul."[1] The details of this "manner" of living (πολιτεύεσθε, in Spanish, *compórtense*) are known to the companions of the movement in Philippi, so Paul does not mention them specifically. They knew it involved the practice of justice, treating women with dignity, caring for the poor and sick, giving bread, and

1. Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, ANTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 489.

Philippians 1:27-30

[27]Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, [28]and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. [29]For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— [30]since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

practicing solidarity with vulnerable people and not in seeking power like tyrants but in transforming society from below.

In a context as stratified as Roman society, to live such a life was crazy. The honorable way of life was to display power and wealth. The loss of power and wealth was shameful. Most of the commentaries point out that Paul intentionally uses πολιτεύομαι, a verb meaning "to be or behave as a citizen," in order to contrast the new way of life with Roman citizenship. For women, this discourse on citizenship must have been very appealing. As noted by Lilian Portefaix, "The fact that women were told that as Christians they would have the dignity of citizens—in this life inside the church and after it in the Kingdom of God—must have been appealing to them. Their social background being what it was, it is reasonable to assume that they interpreted 'citizenship' as the main theme of the letter, since for many Philippian people (if they were not citizens by birth) it might have been inconceivable within the Roman Empire."[2] Paul uses the word "citizen" in Phil 3:20 to confirm this theme when he speaks of heavenly citizenship (πολίτευμα).

The citizenship of the movement is different from Roman citizenship (or that of other cities) because women, slaves, and foreigners could participate in it. In contrast, Roman citizenship and citizenship in other cities of the empire was reserved for free men and entailed privileges only for the few. Citizens were exempt from being flogged, paid no tax, and were not subject to capital punishment such as crucifixion. Several commentators agree that Paul is using the term πολιτεύομαι with the intent to grant everyone in the movement the same privileges, since he,

2. Lilian Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice: Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as Seen by First-century Philippian Women*, ConBNT 20 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988), 138–39.

as a Jew, generally uses the word "walk" or "walking" (περιπατέω) to refer to behavior. Paul here is provocative. Not only is he surrounded by prison guards, but he knows that those who receive his letter are living in a colony where Roman citizenship is a privilege and that many of the ways of being a Roman citizen are not in accordance with the gospel. Roman citizenship marked social differences, especially the fact that it provided a more privileged status for free men. Women were excluded, slaves were disqualified from citizenship, and foreigners could not buy it because of the high cost. Paul contrasts Roman citizenship with the movement's citizenship, which involves social equality and solidarity with the poor, including foreigners and women.

To live a life worthy of the gospel brings its problems, particularly if it is done with a good conscience. According to Acts 23:1, when Paul was in Jerusalem and appeared before the Jewish court, he received a slap from the High Priest, Ananias, when he told him that a good conscience enabled him to live as a good citizen (πολιτεύομαι) in the eyes of the Divine. Perhaps Ananias felt he was being alluded to, since his dishonesty and his collaboration with the Roman Empire were well known. Another example of intertextuality is found in Acts 16:20-24. When Paul and Silas were in Philippi, they undermined the profits of the owners of a slave girl, and the girl's owners accused them explicitly before the judges of causing a riot because Paul and Silas proclaimed (καταγγέλλουσιν) customs (ἔθη) that the owners, as Roman citizens, could neither practice nor accept. Luke tells us that the populace rose up against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates stripped them naked, sent them to be tortured, locked them in a dungeon, and fastened their feet in the stocks. Paul is probably referring to this event, typical of the risks his companions in Philippi experience as they suffer because of their commitment to the gospel. He says in Phil 1:29-30, "you are having the same struggle that you saw I had [at Philippi] and now hear that I still have" as a prisoner in another city.

Those who live counterculturally must take concrete steps not to be intimidated or succumb to external attacks from opponents, including dealing firmly with internal problems or conflicts that could undermine the unity of the group and affect the struggle. The letter is clear in saying that the readers in the community at Philippi are being frightened or intimidated (Phil 1:28) by external forces, probably by the Roman authorities and other people in Philippi.[3] The verb πτύρομαι (to be frightened)

3. John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 279.

was used of horses that were startled by something.[4] Paul's companions in Philippi need to take very seriously the present situation around them. They must not let themselves be intimidated and therefore they need to follow certain recommendations. This section contains important advice that needs to be followed so the community will not be frightened.

In any alternative movement, insistence on unity is a key factor. Paul uses special terms here that emphasize the idea that the Philippian community must fight as one: they need to "stand firm," be of "one spirit" and "one mind," "strive side-by-side," and keep their eyes on the gospel that unites them. Internal disputes must be overcome. From what we read in Phil 4:3, there were tensions among the women leaders. For Paul, the entire community of followers of the Risen One at Philippi was valuable, both the people in leadership and those who formed the base of the community (1:1). Therefore, maintaining unity was essential because only then could they stand firm and form a common bloc against their opponents outside the movement.

Although Paul does not know whether he will leave prison alive or whether he will be kept there for a longer period he hopes he will be set free to travel to Philippi to visit the community. Nevertheless, the other, opposite, possibility was real. So he insists that the community should not depend on him. They need to sort out their internal problems by themselves and stay firmly united, whether he is present or absent. On a hopeful note, Paul explains that attacks from opponents are actually a sign that the perpetrators themselves are headed for disaster because the Divine is with those who are committed to an alternative way of living, to the common good, and to creating a way of being human that is centered on the values proclaimed and practiced by the Resurrected One, Jesus Christ. It is precisely this that will lead the community to salvation.

Salvation and destruction are complementary terms, for if salvation means "victory for justice," then it is achieved by the "destruction of the machinery of injustice and evil."[5] In postmodern times, this sounds like Manichaeism, a tendency to radically disassociate the good from the bad. To avoid this disassociation, it is important to emphasize that Paul's recommendation is a way of life that comes from the gospel and is the practice of love, justice, and care as well as the rejection of personal ambition, instead finding joy in everything. Seeking salvation means serving

4. Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 10 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 69.

5. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, BNTC (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 102.

everyone without making distinctions of gender, culture, social status, or religion. This way of life is radically different (Phil 2:15) in the midst of a discriminatory and exclusionist society. Unity within the movement of the Resurrected One would show the Romans and the city around them that the community in Philippi takes salvation seriously (Phil 2:12) and doesn't just speak of it in the abstract. Therefore, the letter states, it is not only important to have faith but also to put one's beliefs into practice.

Fully believing that Jesus is Lord and living as citizens of a radically new society leads to suffering in contexts where this gospel is seen as a political threat.[6] Paul as prisoner himself suffers, but the members of the movement in Philippi also suffer because they share the same struggle (ἀγών). Even today, the gospel is still a political threat. Lay people, members of religious orders, priests, and pastors whose Christian faith led them to oppose dictatorships in Central and South America have disappeared or gone missing, some having been imprisoned and others executed. Paul refers to these sufferings as something that the Divine, in her grace, gives to the community (χαρίζομαι) because, in Paul's theology, everything comes from the Divine and all is grace. But from a human perspective, what was done to these followers of the Divine was a massive injustice.

The Importance of Unity and Solidarity within the Movement (2:1-4)

In Phil 2:1-4, Paul the prisoner reemphasizes the importance of unity through the rhetorical strategy of listing four conditions that elicit feelings of affection. In his vulnerable state as a prisoner, Paul speaks with tenderness just like a woman would speak to her sisters. There are no hierarchical tones in this appeal. A positive reading of the four conditional phrases shows that the sisters are not lacking in bravery, thanks to the Divine, which is passive in all four conditions. The sisters console and encourage each other lovingly and share the same Spirit that is present in Paul in prison (1:19). They love wholeheartedly (σπλάγχνα) and are moved by mercy (οἰκτιρμοί, 2:1).

Paul asks them, however, with astonishing reiteration, to strengthen their loving unity of thought and purpose. It would appear that the prisoner is sad about something that has happened within the community that could undermine their struggle. It is apparent to him that there are

6. Ibid., 100.

Philippians 2:1-5

[1]If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, [2]make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3]Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. [4]Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. [5]Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

internal conflicts, and by dwelling on them the sisters can hurt each other and hinder the progress of the cause. Perhaps the community is giving excellent witness to outsiders but among themselves they are arguing. If they are able to strengthen unity within the group, Paul's concern, which prevents him from being completely happy, will disappear. Unity means not only being together face to face but also experiencing the same feelings of love for each other, thinking as one, and uniting as one being (σύμψυχοι). Twice Paul employs the term φρονέω, which means "to think practically."[7]

The prisoner calls for unity regarding foundational matters as well, pleading with the Philippian community to "be of the same mind" (Phil 2:2) and think alike about the basic principles of their faith. This could suggest that there is a debate going on in regard to the policies that should guide them within the movement. Most likely Paul refers specifically to his companions in the struggle, Euodia and Syntyche, though his message is also important to the entire community. The progress of the gospel or any political movement requires agreement among its members. They must not get lost in doctrinal debates or practical strategies because they could waste time and lose sight of the horizon that orients them. Similarly, in his letter to the Romans, Paul recommends that the Roman community should put an end to their dispute in which they have tried to invalidate each other's opinions about what to eat or not eat. He says to them, "the reign of the Divine is not food or drink, but justice, peace and joy in the Spirit" (Rom 14:17). In our postmodern times, many people are disillusioned by political struggles, but yielding

7. Stephen Fowl, "Christology and Ethics in Philippians 2:5-11," in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 145.

to this disillusionment can run the risk of seeing things in a simplistic or dualistic manner. There is no doubt, however, that in times of persecution, what matters is people's concrete, everyday lives because their bodily security is more urgent than debates about ideas.

The fact that Paul has the community leaders in mind is clear from his petition in Phil 2:3 asking them to be humble and to "regard others as better than yourselves." This recommendation can be made only to people in power, since people in power occasionally fall into pride and the pursuit of personal ambition. To make this recommendation to the lowlier members of the community would be counterproductive and go against the values of the movement itself, which seeks to empower the empire's excluded and oppressed people with the good news of the Resurrected One. For those already in power, humility is the antidote to pride and self-interest. That said, Paul's call for solidarity is addressed to all members of the community (ἕκαστος; ἕκαστοι, "everyone," 2:4), including the leaders. Looking out for the good of everyone rather than just one's own interests strengthens community unity and adheres to the values the gospel proclaims.

Why the Gospel Led Paul to Prison (2:5-11)

Paul was in prison because he lived and preached the gospel of the Crucified and Risen One. To describe this gospel in Phil 2:5-11, he appropriates a hymn that is known within the movement. Like any oral tradition, the hymn has its own story of origin, but it is clear that Paul interprets it from his own theology of the cross and resurrection. Hence it is claimed that one of Paul's additions is "death on a cross" (Phil 2:8).[8] Much has been written about this hymn, and it has been approached from different perspectives, including examining the origin of the myth of the Divine expressed in the poem as well as allusions to Adam. These debates involve abstract discussions, however, that have no impact on the focus of my analysis of Philippians, which is the politics of everyday reality.[9]

On the concrete level, the poem's usefulness within the letter is extensive. On one hand, it invites those in the movement in Philippi (ἐν ὑμῖν) to have the same attitude or mind (φρονέω) that Christ had as the human face of the Divine visible in the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth. On the

8. Colin Brown, "Ernst Lohmeyer's Kyrios Jesus," in Martin and Dodd, *Where Christology Began*, 14.

9. See Martin and Dodd, *Where Christology Began*.

Philippians 2:6-11

[6]who, though he was in the form
of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
[7]but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
[8]he humbled himself
and became obedient to the
point of death—
even death on a cross.
[9]Therefore God also highly
exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
[10]so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and
under the earth,
[11]and every tongue should
confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

other hand, it invites the people who receive this letter to reject the cult of the emperor and see the Crucified and Risen One as the true Lord. Commentators agree on these two points, though many emphasize the first point over the second.

What is this cognitive attitude, this "practical reasoning" (φρονέω), that the Divine possessed? Everything points to Paul's insistence on not desperately seeking status or privilege. The hymn exemplifies the prior recommendation to imitate the attitude of Christ. In the introduction to the hymn, the demonstrative "this" (τοῦτο), "consider this" (τοῦτο φρονεῖτε), immediately links the hymn to the preceding admonition concerning pride and personal ambition. The Divine does not take advantage of its lofty status as the Divine. Without ceasing to be Divine, this Exalted One manifested love for all and solidarity with the marginalized. This model demonstrates that followers of the Divine must be humble, concerned about the well-being of all vulnerable people ahead of caring for their own interests.

The recommendation to be humble must be contextualized; otherwise the subversive element in such a class-stratified context as Roman society could be lost. To tell poor women or male and female slaves to be humble would have reinforced the *status quo*, since in the eyes of society that was the attitude they were required to assume.[10] Instead,

10. See Demetrius K. Williams, "Philippians," in *Global Bible Commentary*, ed. Daniel Patte (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 482–89.

Paul's choice in using this hymn stresses that, by vindicating Christ the Slave, the Divine empowers these disenfranchised groups (Phil 2:9). To suggest to the elite that they should be humble was strange and even insulting as well as countercultural because the normal or correct expectation was to seek honor and cling to it.[11] To be countercultural was not easy, which is perhaps why the sisters who were leaders were tempted to consider themselves superior to others in the community. That is the kind of power that Jesus criticized. When he spoke to his disciples about tyrants who cling to power, he told them it should not be that way among his followers (Mark 10:43). Sincere humility in people who have a privileged position helps maintain unity in a group that includes people from more than one level of society. Therefore, Paul wanted the sisters in leadership in the community at Philippi to be aware of this problem and practice the values embodied in this poem that arose from the Jewish prophetic tradition.

In a special way, this hymn lends itself to a political reading[12] because, from beginning to end, it presents the Divine in solidarity with the most excluded people of the first century: those without personhood, citizenship, or significance, that is, enslaved women and men. The Crucified One vindicates them and offers them an alternative to the Roman Empire. This humbling of the Divine in solidarity with humanity and visible in the figure of a slave runs contrary to all kinds of honors and privileges so highly prized in Roman imperial society. The parallel between the form (μορφή) of the Divine and the form (μορφή) of a slave is not groundless; it points to the fact that the Divine, as manifest in Jesus of Nazareth, not only took on the human condition (ἄνθρωπος) in general but also assumed the particularly humble role of a slave in total dedication to serving others, which most slaves (δοῦλος) do only under coercion.

In a slave society, the idea that the Divine became manifest in the form of a slave was ridiculous. Divinities existed to receive sacrifices and be venerated and honored. Their status was shared only with the emperors, who were seen as their—shall we say—historical/human manifestations. But this poem presents a different Divine, one who voluntarily becomes

11. Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 129–32.

12. See Angela Standhartinger, "Die paulinische Theologie im Spannungsfeld römisch-imperialer Machtpolitik: Eine neue Perspecktive auf Paulus, kritisch geprüft anhand des Philipperbrief," in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt*. Kongressband des XII Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie (Berlin: Güthersloher Verlagshause, 2005), 369–81.

a slave, not because of any obligation to do so but out of love for human beings, especially for those who are insignificant and excluded, such as female and male slaves. The phrase "he did not cling to his Divine status" is important in a context where ambition abounds and people kill for the kind of power, wealth, and status that demands a servile prostration of its subjects.[13] The power evoked in this poem is different.

Looking briefly at the life of Jesus helps us understand the will to humble oneself. As the gospels recount the life of Jesus, he was not a slave in sociological terms but an artisan born in the domestic stable of a peasant family and lived his life in poverty. He was not a Roman citizen but belonged to an ethnic group marginalized by Roman society and was forced to pay taxes like residents in all provinces that were subject to Rome. He experienced what it was like to live under the occupying forces of an empire. He devoted his life to the movement he founded and announced that another way of life was possible. There was another way to govern, where no one was discriminated against or went hungry, where no one would be oppressed or repressed by the authorities. The way Jesus spoke, practiced justice, and cared for people through massive feeding and healing cost him his life: he was persecuted, arrested, tortured, and sentenced to die on a cross, the capital punishment reserved for slaves and rebels.

Osiek vividly describes what being crucified was like:

> Used as a method of executing criminals, slaves, and enemy captives, the practice of crucifixion spread from Persians to Greeks to Romans. The keynote of this manner of execution is shame. The victim was publicly paraded through the streets, inviting ridicule from bystanders, completely stripped, and fastened by ropes or nails in a very uncomfortable and completely defenseless posture in full view until death by asphyxiation and exposure. . . . Death by crucifixion was considered to deprive the victim of all honor and submerge him or her—for women were also crucified—in shame.[14]

Paul was aware of the brutality of crucifixion. As a chained prisoner awaiting his own death sentence, he was strengthened by this vision of what it meant for the Divine to identify with condemned, marginal people.

13. Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 150.

14. Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, 63.

Philippians 2:8 is a dangerous clause, however, because it is open to manipulation by those in power. The poem states that Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." Taken out of context, this verse can be used to subject marginalized people to the interests of those in power by telling them this is the will of the Divine; therefore, you must imitate Jesus who was obedient. We know that, historically, this argument has been used in relation to slaves and to women, and this is why criticism of sacrificial theology emerged, and rightly so. This theology has long targeted women and other vulnerable sections of society.[15] A coherent interpretation of the poem within the context of the letter prevents such misuse of the passage by revealing that it is a call to defy the rules and customs of the empire.

Jesus was crucified because he chose not to follow established rules and customs. Roman law crucified him for breaking Rome's law, but he was handed over to the Romans by the authorities of his own ethnic group for breaking their laws. Obedience, then, is to willingly accept the consequences of a practice, an attitude contrary to that expected by any government. Jesus' acceptance of the shameful death of the cross—without resorting to heavenly powers, the help of influential people, or bribery—shines a bright light on the sin of injustice. The legal judgment against Jesus and his condemnation to crucifixion points out the presence of evil within the empire. This poem does not explicitly call the empire evil, but the inference is valid. Otherwise, how could Jesus' death be seen as anything more than a tortuous execution reserved for slaves and rebels?

Knowing that the Divine suffered on the cross at the hands of the same Roman military that imprisoned Paul must have consoled Paul and his companions in Philippi during their sufferings. What would have given strength, though, to both the prisoner and his companions in Philippi was not just that the Divine emptied himself (ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν) of his glorious state and experienced solidarity with suffering people but also that Jesus was vindicated by the Divine and lifted up to the exalted position he originally held. Richard J. Cassidy also emphasizes vindication, reading the poem from the perspective of someone incarcerated.[16]

15. See Dolores S. Williams, "Women's Surrogacy Experience and Christian Notion of Redemption," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakin, Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 1–14.

16. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 182–83.

Vindication has to be related to the justice characteristic of the Divine.[17] Those who are crucified by Roman law are now exalted by the Divine. Several commentators state that the name exalted above every other name is the same as YHWH (translated in the LXX as κύριος, "Lord"[18]) who, through Moses, freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. This is the cosmic Divine since all kinds of powers, visible and invisible, that dwell in the universe have to pay tribute to her presence. According to Jewish and Hellenistic cosmology, the universe contains three levels: above the earth, on the earth, and under the earth. Direct allusion to the emperor is clear, as is noted in most commentaries. According to the hymn in Paul's letter, the one who is crucified and rises must be publicly acknowledged; he is the real *paterfamilias*, Caesar (Phil 2:11). If Paul's theology were not couched in patriarchal language, he might have said "for the glory of the Mother Goddess," and then his readers would also see this hymn as a rejection of the Goddess of Rome (see the parody of the Goddess Roma in Rev 17:1-18). In this way, Paul's theology challenged Caesar, who thought that all conquered provinces, cultures, and languages should honor him.

The verses of the hymn suggest that the emphasis should not, however, be placed on seeing Jesus as a role model and imitating him. Although this element is present, Charles B. Cousar puts the hymn's emphasis on "announcing the defeat of the forces that enslave human beings."[19] Just as with Paul and the Philippian community, a community at a disadvantage because it faces oppression and persecution can find strength and hope in realizing that the Divine triumphs over oppressive powers. Apocalyptic literature reflects this imagery and reinforces resistance in the midst of suffering and persecution. Reading the poem as a provocative political statement takes away the absolute dominion of the emperor and also highlights the emperor's unhealthy attitudes toward power, luxury, and grandeur.

While Paul's use of the poem is a powerful defense of the gospel, from a judicial point of view it is a failure because it will not help him win in his trial. If one takes into account the censorship of prisoners' letters, it suggests that perhaps Paul's letter amounts to choosing death, as he mentioned in Phil 1:22, not by suicide but by a countercultural public

17. Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 141.

18. Ibid., 145.

19. Charles B. Cousar, *Philippians and Philemon, A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 59.

proclamation of the gospel. If the letter to the Philippians was written in Rome, it would be the testament that led to Paul's martyrdom. If, however, it was written in Ephesus, then his release would have been the result of a special event, such as the amnesty that would have been granted to prisoners by Nero when he took power, a customary gesture at such times.[20]

There is an unsolved question: how could a letter with this political statement pass censorship? Several things could have happened. First, if the letter was written in Greek and the man who was in charge at that moment did not know Greek well, he might have let it go. Second, Paul might have had a stroke of luck if the censors had relaxed their guard for a moment. Or finally, the hymn may have been an addition made by Epaphroditus at Paul's request, added after he left the prison and before delivering the letter to the community.

Shine Like Stars in the Midst of a Crooked and Perverse Society (2:12-18)

This large section of Philippians (1:27–2:18) describes the cause for which Paul was contending and ends with the prisoner's recommendations to the community of Philippi. Several commentators have proposed that the opening (1:27–2:4) and closing (2:12-18) of the section form a chiasmus, with the hymn placed in the center (2:5-11) as the cause for which Paul was striving.

Paul asks the community to continue in their obedience. The word "obey" (ὑπακούω) comes as a shock to modern readers, especially since the passage has been used historically to demand obedience from women and slaves. Therefore it is important to understand what Paul means. The prisoner did not directly ask the Philippians to obey him; the sentence is not explicit in this sense. He asks them to continue their work in the movement of the Resurrected One; in this way, they will remain faithful to their commitment to follow the gospel. This is what it means to be obedient to the Gospel, to Christ who was obedient to the same cause when he entered into solidarity with humanity, took on the form of a slave, and assumed the risk of being put to death on a cross.

Far from being simplistically subservient, the female companions in the movement are rebels just as Christ was because they take part

20. Angela Standhartinger, "Aus der Welt eines Gefangenen: Die Kommunikationsstruktur des Philipperbriefs im Spiegel seiner Abfassungssituation," *NovT* 55 (2013): 150.

Philippians 2:12-18

12Therefore, my beloved, just as you
have always obeyed me, not only in my
presence, but much more now in my
absence, work out your own salvation
with fear and trembling; 13for it is God
who is at work in you, enabling you both
to will and to work for his good pleasure.
14Do all things without murmuring
and arguing, 15so that you may be
blameless and innocent, children of
God without blemish in the midst of a
crooked and perverse generation, in
which you shine like stars in the world.
16It is by your holding fast to the word
of life that I can boast on the day of
Christ that I did not run in vain or labor
in vain. 17But even if I am being poured
out as a libation over the sacrifice and
the offering of your faith, I am glad and
rejoice with all of you—18and in the
same way you also must be glad and
rejoice with me.

in a countercultural movement. To continue being a rebel means to be obedient to the cause or, better still, to remain faithful to the cause. That faithfulness involves working earnestly but also with humility (φόβου καὶ τρόμου) before the Divine. Salvation here refers not to personal eschatological salvation but to the "well-being of their common life together as a community."[21] Thus the literal translation of φόβου καὶ τρόμου as "fear and trembling" in the NRSV does not convey the phrase's full meaning. The two terms come together as a stereotyped expression in the Hebrew Bible, according to I-Jin Loh and Eugene Nida, who maintain that the expression describes a spirit of reverence and humility. This spirit "should characterize mutual relationships within the Christian community."[22] It is the Divine who strengthens and empowers community members.

While participation in the movement is a risk and brings its own suffering, it also produces satisfaction in the present as well as eschatological fulfillment at a personal and communal level because of the faith of its followers. They must live coherently as worthy citizens of the radically democratic government of the Resurrected One. They must have respect for one another and refuse to take part in destructive criticism and discussions that lead nowhere. They must make an honest living and not give rise to corruption. In other words, they need to make a difference in Philippian society. Thus, with personal and community witness, they will shine like stars in a dark sky (Phil 2:15), illuminating a society in which

21. I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1977), 67.

22. Ibid., 67.

corruption and robbery are commonplace (see also Dan 12:3). Both meanings of the term ἐπέχοντες, "standing firm" and "offering," are probably present here. If this is so, it would indicate that the community of Philippi shines forth not only because it resists the values of a corrupt society but also because it offers a message of liberation from those values.

The presence of an apostle is not needed in order for the Philippians to work for the cause of the gospel. What is important for the leader in jail is to have confidence that his companions can carry on the movement without him and will continue working with the same zeal. Paul apparently knows their community well and he has reason to be very proud of them. Moreover, he explicitly says he wants to brag before the Divine on "the day of Christ," that is, at the end of time, that he has not failed to fully share the gospel with them (Phil 2:16).

The section concludes with the paradox that, while Paul experiences uncertainty between life and death, he experiences this uncertainty without any distress. In fact, he relativizes the potential verdict in a cheerful way, in case he should be sentenced to death. He does so by using a sacrificial cultic image, a practice that was common in Paul's Jewish culture and also in the Roman religious sphere. It is similar to the exhortation in Rom 12:1-2 where the Roman communities are encouraged not to adopt the values of their society but to transform society permanently, discerning the will of the Divine in the midst of that society. They are to offer their bodies as a sacrifice to this task, as their rational-spiritual service. In Phil 2:17, the sacrifice and service of the ministry of both Paul and his female companions in Philippi is offered and dedicated to glorifying the Divine, just as the humiliation and vindication of the Crucified One brought about the glory of the Divine. We can see in the text an image of the Philippians as priests and priestesses offering their sacrifice of faith. Paul delights in this image despite his suffering. He rejoices because with his life he has made a contribution to the sacrifice they all offer,[23] and he invites them to rejoice also. This repeated theme of joy comes as a surprise when expressed by a prisoner.

Immediate Plans from Prison (2:19–3:1)

Philippians 2:19–3:1 appears to be and may have been the final part of the letter, but since we are reading the final canonical version in which this

23. Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 161.

Philippians 2:19–3:1

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send
Timothy to you soon, so that I may be
cheered by news of you. 20 I have no
one like him who will be genuinely con-
cerned for your welfare. 21 All of them are
seeking their own interests, not those of
Jesus Christ. 22 But Timothy's worth you
know, how like a son with a father he has
served with me in the work of the gospel.
23 I hope therefore to send him as soon as
I see how things go with me; 24 and I trust
in the Lord that I will also come soon.

25 Still, I think it necessary to send
to you Epaphroditus—my brother and
co-worker and fellow soldier, your mes-
senger and minister to my need; 26 for he
has been longing for all of you, and has
been distressed because you heard that
he was ill. 27 He was indeed so ill that he
nearly died. But God had mercy on him,
and not only on him but on me also, so
that I would not have one sorrow after
another. 28 I am the more eager to send
him, therefore, in order that you may
rejoice at seeing him again, and that I
may be less anxious. 29 Welcome him
then in the Lord with all joy, and honor
such people, 30 because he came close
to death for the work of Christ, risking
his life to make up for those services
that you could not give me.

3:1 Finally, my brothers and sisters,
rejoice in the Lord.

To write the same things to you is
not troublesome to me, and for you it
is a safeguard.

section is the middle of the letter, the news and travel plans of Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Paul himself seem out of place. For some reason Paul thinks it is important to mention these plans before he continues talking about what really matters to him in the circumstances in which he finds himself. Since he devotes many verses to this section, it is worthwhile to visualize the scene in the context of the whole letter. Both the senders and the recipients have committed themselves to the movement of the Resurrected One and that commitment has produced problems for them.

To repeat, Paul is in prison in Ephesus or Rome. He is assisted by Timothy, a very close collaborator who visits him as if he were a family member. He is also attended by Epaphroditus, their collaborator, whom Paul calls an apostle (ἀπόστολος) or "sent one" from the community in Philippi to minister (as a λειτουργός, "minister") to his urgent financial need. Perhaps Epaphroditus was part of the leadership too, as a deacon (διάκονος) or an overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) of some aspect of the community (Phil 1:1). In the city of Philippi, the movement had its female leaders, Eudoia and Syntyche, along with Clement and most likely Lydia, founder of the community. In both locations, these members of the movement experienced hostility: Paul because of his difficult position as a prisoner

rejected by other preachers (1:17); and the community at Philippi because of intimidation by outsiders (1:28) and some internal tensions among the female leaders (4:2).

In both contexts there is concern and anguish. In Philippi, the companions are concerned not only for their colleague who is in prison but also for their envoy Epaphroditus because somehow they heard he was ill. Some believe that he became seriously ill while he was traveling to visit Paul in prison. Since he was carrying a monetary offering, he would not have been traveling alone;[24] therefore, whoever travelled with him could have returned to Philippi and alerted the community to his condition. Meanwhile, in prison, Paul is concerned about the community at Philippi and their situation, since, as one of the founders of the community, he is responsible for their commitment and participation in the movement. But he is also concerned for them because they are worried about whether Epaphroditus has recovered his health or whether he has died. This is causing anxiety. Paul feels powerless; he needs to hear news from Philippi, and his colleagues there are eager to hear from him in prison. The atmosphere is one of uncertainty. The need for information on both sides, to give and receive news, is very common among detainees. For political prisoners, this need is aggravated because what happens to one directly affects the others since they are all deeply involved in the same cause that produced the imprisonment.

Paul wants to do something to overcome this situation. He cannot send Timothy at this time because he needs him nearby until it becomes clear what the judgment will be (2:23). He decides to send Epaphroditus to Philippi first (2:28). It is possible that the community at Philippi was expecting Timothy to come before Epaphroditus, which is why Paul mentions them in reverse order chronologically. What he is saying between the lines is, yes, he is going to send Timothy soon, but first he needs his situation in prison to be clarified. He even thinks he will be able to go to Philippi himself in the future (2:24), but meanwhile he believes it is necessary (2:25) for Epaphroditus to return to Philippi and deliver the letter he is now writing and tell them in detail about Paul's situation. In this way, Paul expects to relieve the anxiety the companions are experiencing due to lack of news. On the one hand, the community will be

24. Gordon D. Fee, *Comentario de la Epístola a los Filipenses*, Colección teológica contemporánea, trans. Dora González and Ismael López (Barcelona: CLIE, 2004), 357.

reassured and happy, and, on the other, Paul's concern is alleviated and his distress is eased (2:28).

Several commentators assert that the inclusion of characters such as Timothy and Epaphroditus illustrates a common practice of teachers of rhetoric, proposing them as models for imitation. The example of the Christ was mentioned first (2:5-11) and then the well-known companions Timothy and Epaphroditus. John Reumann suggests, however, that rhetoric is not the objective here.[25] These two companions embody the behavior of those who seek and strive for a different way of life (1:25) They are in solidarity with others and are not seeking their own interest. They are not presented as models for imitation, since the community of Philippi already lives that way.

In addition, each one is recommended in a different way to the Philippians, since Epaphroditus belongs to the community while Timothy is a visitor. From a political perspective, both relationships are important in times of repression. Timothy's case is typical in the sense that the community must trust its contacts in order to speak freely without fear of being betrayed. In the context of a network of secret police, such as existed in the Roman Empire, trust in contacts was fundamental, and the community of the Resurrected One living in a Roman colony knew this. Timothy was recommended in this regard. Paul puts his hands in the fire for Timothy and presents him as "the apple of his eye," which is to say that Timothy is close to him and cherished. The community is to consider Timothy a trusted emissary because he sincerely cares about the community of Philippi and does not seek his own interests. In addition, they have already worked together as a family for the sake of the gospel. Even though the community already knows Timothy, Paul basically wants them to have absolute confidence in him, just as if it were Paul himself visiting them (2:20).

The relationship between Epaphroditus and the community is different. Some commentaries suggest that Paul recommended him very warmly because he is sending him back sooner than expected, and he is worried that the women leaders who sent him might be disappointed, thinking he had not fulfilled all of his assigned tasks. This interpretation seems unlikely, however, given the experiences that the community and Paul were enduring. Rather, the effusive commendation of Epaphroditus may have been due to the fact that he had been near death. Paul is

25. Reumann, *Philippians*, 439.

emphasizing that Epaphroditus risked his life for the sake of the gospel by visiting a political prisoner and bringing him financial assistance. Without details of his illness and near-death experience, the recommendation would have been unnecessary, since Epaphroditus was well known as someone who belonged to the community at Philippi. Epaphroditus had come close to death, but despite his illness and recovery, he did not attempt to return immediately to Philippi but continued to minister to Paul. This caused mutual distress in the letter writer and in those receiving his message (2:28).

On the other hand, consider the delicate and dangerous situation of people who visited prisoners charged with the crime called *maiestas*, a seditious crime against the emperor. It is not an exaggeration to say that they were risking their lives by being associated with a rebel prisoner who refused to acknowledge Caesar as lord and savior. In letters from prison, where censorship occurs every day, wise prisoners do not say things that could jeopardize the safety of the letter's recipients. Rather, it is safer if the letter writer says that members of the *praetoria* now know the gospel and send greetings from the community in Caesar's household (1:13; 4:22). In this way, Paul is saying that the community in Philippi should receive Epaphroditus with joy and honor him for risking his life because of the movement. The community should recognize that it was not an easy task to come from far away to visit a prisoner and deliver things he needed and to fall very ill in the effort.

Epaphroditus is not described in hierarchical terms. On one hand, he is a brother to Paul, not a servant, but a coworker and a fellow soldier in the movement of the Resurrected One. On the other hand, he is an apostle from the companions of Philippi, an apostle in the sense that he was sent to carry out a specific task, and he is a person who ministers to Paul as a "priestly service" (λειτουργός). The term belongs to the Philippian community and was created by them.[26] It is possible that Epaphroditus may have assumed an office that included the collection and delivery of money, as was customary in Greek and Roman cities. There was a public office that had to do mostly with finances.[27] The sense of "priestly service" that is present in the term λειτουργός reveals that the solidarity created by "giving food to the prisoner" was something sacred.[28]

26. Ibid., 443.
27. Ibid., 444.
28. Ibid.

Paul's claim that he will soon visit the community at Philippi (2:24) should not be taken literally when reading his letter from prison. Statements of this kind show a sincere desire to be with loved ones, but there is no indication in the letter that supports that possibility. Such statements serve to strengthen the sender and to reassure those concerned about the prisoner. Something similar happens today when protesters shout, "A people united will never be defeated," even though the army continues to systematically crush them. In this vein, this section ends with the commonly repeated invitation to rejoice (3:1). Because it will be good for his recipients who are concerned about him, Paul says, "Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord" (3:1).

Philippians 3:2–4:3

What Really Matters

Matters of Humanity (3:2-16)

This section of the letter is more complex and hurried, both in style and in content. It contains a variety of themes, including theological reflections, athletic analogies, and exhortations. Nevertheless, considering that prison has become a theological location for Paul, interesting conclusions can be drawn. For example, Angela Standhartinger, who takes the viewpoint that this section is letter C,[1] finds elements of Jewish testament literature here (Phil 3:4-14; 3:15-17; 3:20-21; 4:8-9); for her, sections 3:2-21 and 4:8-9 comprise a "sapiential testament."[2] She agrees with Bruce Rahtjen, who affirms that this is letter C, written outside of prison but in a situation of "imminent deadly threat," and therefore formal elements of a Jewish testament can be seen. In this genre, people are urged to behave well, avoid mistakes, and imitate

1. As noted in the Introduction, my analysis concentrates on the final redaction; if the letter was originally composed of three letters (called A, B, and C), C would be Phil 3:2-21 along with parts of 4:1-9. See Introduction.

2. A biographical part (Phil 3:4-14), a paraenesis (3:15-17; 4:8-9), and a statement regarding the future (3:20-21). Angela Standhartinger, "'Join in Imitating Me': Towards an Interpretation of Philippians 3," *NTS* 54 (2008): 429.

the person who is about to die.[3] Although I am reading the letter in its final canonical redaction, as if it were written entirely from prison, this observation seems interesting.

This portion of the letter reveals new opponents. So far Paul has spoken of people who belonged to the same movement but who did not have good relations with him or his companions (1:5-7) and others who didn't belong to the movement but instead intimidated Christian communities, especially the Philippian community (1:28). These latter people were the Romans, whom Paul will address at the end of chapter 3. In this first part of the chapter, Paul discusses a third group: Jews who were followers of Jesus but who belonged to a different part of the movement of the Resurrected One, different because this group insisted that Gentile believers be circumcised as a sign of incorporation into a Jewish messianic faith. The group of opponents who participated in the same movement as Paul but preached for their own self-interest rather than that of the gospel did not interest Paul much, because in the end they spread the cause of the movement by proclaiming the good news of the Resurrected One (1:18).

Paul did care about this group, the Jewish followers of Jesus, mainly because their ideological-religious platform differed from his on fundamental issues, such as how to conduct one's life and where to put one's trust. For a prisoner whose strength comes from weakness, trust cannot be invested in the fragility of law, any law, or in one's own efforts. Trust must be invested in something more powerful. Paul takes this position in the belief that the Divine raised the Crucified One, and this faith empowers him to believe that he is able to resist suffering and move forward. He also knows that the justice of the Divine is on his side since she has justified him in his actions and has welcomed him with his faults because of his faith in the One who was crucified by the Roman Empire but resurrected by the Divine. Paul's desire to conform to the image of Christ at the end of time is the main motivation that helps him resist the adversity of prison.

That is the kind of faith that Paul wants his companions at Philippi to have. Hence, the objectives of this section are threefold. First, Paul seeks to reaffirm the values that the community already knows since becoming members of the movement. Second, he wants to warn them against groups like the Jewish believers in Jesus or the Gentiles who converted to Judaism, both of whom insist on the need to rely on external religious

3. Ibid., 427–32.

symbols.[4] He also wants to warn them against their Roman neighbors who are interested only in appearances and earthly pleasures.[5] The community at Philippi should not imitate any of these. Third, Paul invites the community to persevere, to resist adversity, to follow the call of the Divine, and to adopt a new way to live together with others as citizens of a new reign, renewed in the image of the risen Christ.

A Simple Human Being Committed to the Cause (3:2-11)

It is not known why Paul introduces a warning against this group, as there is little evidence of a Jewish community in Philippi.[6] Some commentators think this group of Jews is more likely a concern in the city where he was imprisoned. It could have been a group of Jewish-Christian missionaries like those in Galatia, who insisted that Gentile believers be circumcised in order to become heirs to the promises the Divine made to Abraham. Since Paul's reasons are unknown, this passage must not be read as an anti-Jewish text. In addition, Paul is not talking about Jews in general, since he himself is a Jew, heir to the Torah and Prophets, as he insists in this passage. He is speaking about a specific group, called "Judaizers" by many commentaries, a small group that thinks and acts differently from Paul in regard to what is necessary for acceptance by the Divine.

The possibility of their presence in Philippi would be deplorable news for Paul, and he uses ironic language similar to the tone of his letter to the Galatians. His three epithets against this group are loaded with irony and sarcasm, typical of rhetoric that seeks to disqualify opponents. The first epithet, "dog," an impure animal, was used by the Jews as a derogatory term to refer to Gentiles. In Phil 3:2, Paul turns the epithet around and applies it to a specific group of Jews. Ben Witherington III explains that at the gates of Roman houses (villas) there was often a sign saying in Latin CAVE CANEM or "beware of the dog."[7] In Latin

4. Gordon D. Fee, *Comentario de la Epístola a los Filipenses*, Colección teológica contemporánea, trans. Dora González and Ismael López (Barcelona: CLIE, 2004), 371; I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1977), 93.

5. Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 170–74.

6. Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, ANTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 83.

7. Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 188.

Philippians 3:2-11

[2]Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! [3]For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—[4]even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: [5]circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6]as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

[7]Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. [8]More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9]and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. [10]I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, [11]if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

America, similar signs are still used to warn visitors of the presence of guard dogs that could attack them. Written in a Roman context, Paul's warning is ironic, since this group of Jewish missionaries would be seen by many "as the watchdogs of orthodoxy."[8] The second epithet, "evil workers" (Phil 3:2), also shows some irony by applying the term to the missionaries who are faithful to the law of Moses, even though in the Psalter "evildoers" are those who do not follow the law (Ps 5:5) and those who are not guided by the justice of the Divine (5:8-9). The third epithet, "those who mutilate the flesh" (3:2), uses a pun (κατατομή, περιτομή) to refer to circumcision (*peritomē*) as a mutilation (*katatomē*).

It is possible that Paul speaks here through unhealed wounds. His thought process while in prison was influenced by events that still pained him, including, perhaps, his negative experiences in Galatia with these opponents. But in this letter, the context is different and the fundamental problem is not really this group of Jewish missionaries, since they may not even be present in Philippi. Perhaps Paul is using a prevention strategy to protect his recipients against the possible arrival of people who discriminate against the Gentiles as unclean and outside of the promises

8. Ibid., 189.

of Abraham if they are not circumcised. Or Paul might be using this case as a starting point to clarify what really matters: the cause of the gospel.

Continuing the game of who's who in the presence of the Divine, the prisoner launches a confession of faith in opposition to this group, using the first-person plural, "We are . . . ." The pronoun represents Paul and Timothy as well as their Philippian companions, including Epaphroditus. Jews and Gentiles together, they are followers of Jesus who do not put their trust in works of the law. They are the people who live in harmony with the Divine One of Abraham, that is, in communion with the Risen One, since they orient their lives according to the reign of the Spirit and not according to the law. They are the ones, circumcised or not, who have become part of the alliance of the people of the Divine, descendants of Abraham because they have the symbol of circumcision engraved in their hearts (Rom 2:29). So they serve (λατρεύοντες) the Divine, not only by complying with a physical requirement of the law of Moses and its mark made on the male body, but guided by the Spirit and by faith.

For Paul, circumcision is something external that does not affect the conscience, something that can be manipulated by selfish interests. Circumcision of the heart, on the other hand, independent of physical circumcision, as the Jewish prophets proclaimed, is that which is valued by the Divine and is seen in the practice of justice and care for others that springs from grace and mercy. The term λατρεύοντες means both to "worship" (Phil 3:3b) and also to "serve." These two meanings may be present in 3:3 because we worship the Divine through service to the needy and those around us. The companions at Philippi are in solidarity with Paul in his need, and, in serving his needs, they serve and worship the Divine. The confession also exclaims that "we boast in Christ Jesus," we are proud to live in communion with him (3:3c). This, in the plural, would be equal to the confessional statement in Rom 1:17, expressed in a negative way: "We are not ashamed of the gospel." Or, put another way, we are not ashamed of belonging to the movement that honors a crucified man who was resurrected by the Divine; in this we rejoice.

Blind compliance to the law can lead to pride, to feeling superior, and even to excluding others as the religious authorities did in the gospels. So Paul is against giving any value to external things or to placing any confidence in laws, certain religious rites, or the privileged status of a chosen people. Additionally, in the case of the Romans, Paul denies value to such prestigious things as social status, honor, and wealth. So to the prisoner, the important thing for a member of the movement of the Resurrected One is not status of a Jew or a Roman, but simply that

of human beings, "citizens" worthy of the Gospel (Phil 1:27). Bonhoeffer said something similar in prison in Tegel, a day after the failed attack against Hitler that was scheduled for July 20, 1944: "If one has completely renounced making something of oneself—whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader . . . —then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, . . . then one takes seriously no longer one's own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane."[9]

In Paul's view, to be a mere human being, a citizen of God's reign, means being shaped according to Christ and not according to Caesar. This implies a radical transformation. Paul and the community of Philippi have experienced this radical change of values whereby people once considered insignificant or scandalous to society, for example, the prisoner or the crucified, are seen to be valuable in the eyes of the Divine. There is an obvious parallel with the hymn in Phil 2:5-11, when the human face of the Divine, leaving aside all honors and privileges but remaining Divine, takes the form of a slave and, because of fidelity to the same cause, is crucified by the Roman authorities.

Paul may once have been proud of his credentials as a Jew and how he despised the Gentiles as unclean, but his encounter with the Jew who is the Resurrected One changed his life. Paul once possessed in even more abundance than his current opponents the things considered valuable by Jewish society: he was circumcised as an infant; he was born into the tribe of Benjamin, a prestigious ethnic Jewish group; he was able to speak Aramaic as his mother tongue; he was an expert in the law, authorizing him to zealously persecute the early members of the movement; and he was able to impeccably center his entire life in the practice of justice that comes from the law. But these things were no longer of value to Paul.

In prison, Paul had time to think deeply about his past and his future; "consider" (ἡγέομαι) in the first-person singular is used three times in two verses (Phil 3:7-8). Using the accounting terms of profit and loss, Paul lists his gains and losses in these verses. What is considered valuable by his Jewish opponents he considers a loss at this time in his life. The reason, he explains, is that he has discovered another way of being and acting; these new values have changed the direction of his life. Christ, the founder of the movement to which he is committed, is the person who transformed

9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer works, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 486.

him (3:9) and changed his perspective on things that were of value. Verse 8 intensifies verse 7 by asserting that all things, including those listed above and perhaps others, such as the privilege of being a Roman citizen, lost value and became useless (σκύβαλα, "rubbish," "excrement") because (διὰ) he values so highly the privilege of knowing Jesus Christ. "Knowing" should be understood as referring to the Semitic sense of empathy, in this case with the Jew who was crucified and resurrected. But "knowing" can also express knowledge of the power of Christ's resurrection, which for Paul is the ultimate hope. In Phil 3:8b, he again states his gains and losses. For the prisoner, Jesus Christ is the reason why he opted to lose everything, even his liberty, and be in prison. But his cause, the movement of the Resurrected One, which society considers nonsense and waste, has become for the prisoner a supreme value, to the extent that he is willing to die for it. In this way, to consider death as something to be won (1:21) and Christ as someone to be won (3:8) are correlative statements.

For Paul, what really matters is the cause of the gospel, which in concrete terms means to live in communion with Christ, to think and act as Christ taught, and to suffer, die, and rise like Christ. In other words, Paul points out what he wants: to gain Christ, to know Christ, and to be found in Christ. This typical Pauline declaration of achieving Divine justice that comes from faith in Christ requires being in communion with the Divine and with the neighbor in a new and different way. The justice that comes from the law of the Divine is what the prophets proclaimed, and it is written in human hearts; it is Divine justice full of grace. This merciful justice can be seen in the life of faith of Jesus Christ, the Jew of Nazareth, because he was faithful to his commitment to the reign of the Divine until the end. This is the faith that provides great security for Paul and gives him the confidence he needs in order to endure imprisonment and whatever comes after the trial.

Interestingly, in Phil 3:8, Paul uses the term "my Lord," indirectly affirming the lordship of Christ rather than of Caesar. Because of censorship, he could pay dearly for this assertion in a letter from prison. As we saw in the previous chapter, deciding to include the hymn in his letter is clearly a political statement in which the prisoner is putting his cards on the table. By affirming "Jesus is my Lord," Paul shows he is not willing to compromise in his defense of the gospel in court. He is courageous because he believes and feels justified by faith. Verses 10 and 11 have greater significance when seen from the perspective of a suffering prisoner awaiting the death sentence. We hear the verses as a cry that comes from the soul as a desire "to know" (γινώσκω) or to experience

Christ and the power of the resurrection. Since Paul also shares in Christ's sufferings, he wants to share the same fate of death, but with the hope that he will also be raised from the dead like the Crucified One in an eschatological future.

Together on the Way (3:12-16)

Despite being chained, the prisoner uses figurative language from athletics to describe his mood as that of a runner who is confident and determined as he "press[es] on" and is "straining forward" to reach the finish line (Phil 3:12). The lack of a direct object for the two verbs meaning "to achieve" (λαμβάνω, καταλαμβάνω) is grammatically confusing, even as it opens up possibilities for interpreting what Paul has not yet achieved. Interpretive efforts might seem limited, however, when relating this passage to preceding verses, especially 10 and 11 as well as to alternative concepts found in this passage like "to be perfected" and "to complete" (τελειόω, 3:12). Paul is still in the race of life and is dependent on a world that is governed by chronological time. He has not yet reached the full knowledge of Christ or fully grasped the resurrection of the dead in its eschatological dimensions. Even though he knows he is not perfect or without reproach, Paul knows he has been justified by the Divine through faith in the Resurrected One, and he is confident that Christ is in full solidarity with him in his humanness, especially as a prisoner. The purpose of the race of life is to continue on the way to perfection as he molds himself into the image of Christ, a process that will culminate at the *eschaton* with the resurrection of the dead by the Divine.

When a person is about to die, the image of resurrection becomes increasingly powerful. While Paul has used the metaphor of an athlete in the past, in his present situation it becomes more significant. Such a metaphor gives prisoners the feeling of full freedom when they are confined to a small cell with no possibility of movement; their thoughts and visions can stretch and fly to infinity, to a non-immediate future. The image of a race where his feet can move at high speed gives Paul pleasure and relieves the physical stress of the tightness and immobility of his chains.

For Etty Hillesum, the biggest problem of the concentration camp had to do with space: "Of all the hardships they suffer in Westerbork, probably the worst is the lack of space." Yet her spirit flew out beyond the barracks, as she indicates in expressions like this: "Yes, misery is terrible and yet it often happens that at night, as the day is coming to an end, within me, deep down, I walk with agile strides along the barbed-wire

Philippians 3:12-16

12Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. 15Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. 16Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

fence."[10] Karl Gaspar, who was in prison in the Philippines, states, "A prison may reduce the detainee's world into a small space, but their capacity to dream will enable them to soar across the limitless sky. Persons can never be fully imprisoned if they can create a world where they can fly with the wings of freedom."[11] Similarly, Paul knows that Jesus the Messiah was not nailed to the cross to be eaten by carrion birds or to remain in the tomb. He was resurrected to demonstrate a power different from that of the tyrants of empires and to show that there is another way to be citizens.

For Paul, this race to the finish requires its participants to become citizens worthy of the gospel by rejecting dehumanizing practices and living life to the full, constantly oriented by a vision of the future that awaits (Phil 3:13). The prisoner is like an athlete racing for a prize. But unlike an athlete who is not really sure that he will reach his goal, Paul the prisoner faces all trials with the confidence that the Divine has called him to take the prize. (This call from above introduces the theme of heavenly citizenship, which will be discussed below.) Paul uses the metaphor of a race to capture his experience because he wants the members of the movement to see their struggles as a process involving obstacles, setbacks, harmful distractions, and internal conflicts. He wants them to see that, if they focus on their commitment to the goal for which they risk their lives, they will find hope and inspiration in the cause of the gospel and the Reign of the Divine, in Synoptic terms. Paul is indirectly telling his companions in Philippi not to expect the fulfillment of Divine promises

10. Etty Hillesum, *El corazón pensante de los barracones: Cartas* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2001), 99.

11. Karl Gaspar, *How Long? Prison Reflections of Karl Gaspar,* ed. Helen Graham and Breda Noonan (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1985), 21.

in this present time. Instead, he assures them that it is the Divine who is calling them to be conformed to the image of the Risen One, a process that ensures ultimate fulfillment because the Crucified-Risen One is in full solidarity with them.

Verses 15-16 are not, however, an invitation to Paul's companions to join in the process of fulfillment because they have already been participating in that race just as Paul has (3:16). In this process he invites them to be of one mind in the way of thinking he proposes. Verse 15 suggests that there were various ideas about this process in the community at Philippi. He would like them to share the same vision. The commentaries point to several possibilities. If there were divisions at Philippi, then Paul is using the word "perfect" in an ironic way: "All perfect people should have these same feelings along with me," referring to some members of the community in Philippi. The difference of opinion would seem to come from some people in the community who believed they had already reached the goal at the end of the race. The other possibility is to understand the term as "maturity," to indicate "All mature people should have these same feelings." Either translation fits well since Paul says explicitly that the Divine is going to enable those who think differently to see (Phil 3:15) things in a better way.

What is clear in this section is that there is no evidence of strong controversy or of condemnation, in contrast to the case of other opponents Paul brings up later. It is striking how the prisoner expresses himself: he has little tolerance for the group that wants to impose circumcision, but he does tolerate people with differing views within the faction of the movement in which he participates (1:15-18).

Civil Matters (3:17–4:3)

Citizens Worthy of a Heavenly State (3:17-21)

If what really matters is the cause of the gospel and not the pursuit of privileges or status in Jewish or Roman society, then ethical questions become fundamental. This is the focus of Phil 3:17-21. Instead of using images from athletics here, Paul expresses his teaching in terms of imitation, a well-known framework that was commonly taught in schools of rhetoric in antiquity.[12] The prisoner invites the sisters and brothers to

12. John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 33B (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 590.

Philippians 3:17-21

17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

imitate him and take note of (σκοπέω) others among his followers who behave like him. Those who were closest to Paul and acted in solidarity with him were Epaphroditus and Timothy, whose behavior is described in Phil 2:19-30. But Paul's order is not very agreeable to modern ears: "Imitate me, all of you together" (3:17). It sounds pedantic and, as Elizabeth A. Castelli notes, it could lead modern readers to feel authorized to exert control and power in hierarchical relationships.[13] Even if the language of imitation was an accepted part of rhetoric at the time, modern readers have to acknowledge that being in prison for the sake of the gospel does not justify top-down patriarchal attitudes. The evidence shows that political prisoners or those struggling for liberation on behalf of people on the margins can be as macho as they are passionate about justice.

In Phil 3:17-21, Paul describes behavior that should be avoided. Although it is unclear which specific group is leading a life of reproach, Paul's description of the behavior to be avoided is clear. Paul expresses his views in a somewhat crude way, according to the prevailing rhetorical style, using language that is not necessarily to be taken as a literal description of reality. Nevertheless, the three descriptions in 3:19 are related to the here and now, the present. First, for those who set a bad example, their god is their belly. Depending on the identity of the people Paul is referring to, the term "belly" can encompass the excesses of gluttony for libertines or the excesses of a strict Jewish diet for the group that tries to impose circumcision on people from other cultures. Although these two interpretations of "belly" are considered opposites, in the end they produce the same result: they cloud the horizon and block out what is

13. Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Nashville, TN: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 95–97.

really important. People who consider the belly a divinity find it difficult to hear the call of the Divine to act in a way worthy of the gospel.

The next two criticisms of such people follow the same line. Their glory, what they take pride in, is actually their shame (αἰσχύνῃ, Phil 3:19b), a term that often refers to the genitals; this is still a common euphemism in many cultures, including Latin America. Here, it could refer either to physical circumcision or to sexual immorality. Paul suggests that excessive devotion to food or boasting about the genitals in the context of either circumcision or orgies leads to the same thing: not behaving as citizens worthy of the gospel, not loving and being in solidarity with one's neighbor.

The third description sums up the two previous descriptions of persons that gospel people should not imitate: "their minds are set on earthly things" (Phil 3:19c). In other words, their rational guidance (φρονέω) originates in earthly or material things, such as selfish pleasures in the case of the libertines or pride in a circumcised penis in the case of religious people. For the prisoner, this is not what really matters as he makes clear in his earlier profit and loss account (3:4-8). Paul is clearly not dealing in moralizations in this passage but is bemoaning a lack of sensitivity vis à vis the suffering of others, which he sees as an absence of solidarity. The Crucified One did not boast of his glory in being part of the Divine but laid aside his Divine status in order to live in solidarity with humanity, taking on the form of a slave (2:6-8). This is Paul's rationale behind the practical orientation that the followers of the Resurrected One must embody. Paul in prison and the close colleagues who support him there follow this example and not that of other people around them who focus only on their own self-interest.

Interpreting Paul's criticisms raises the question again of the identity of those whose behavior is not worthy of imitation. In Phil 3:18, Paul introduces them as "enemies of the cross of Christ" and says that they are "many" (πολλοί). He has already referred to these enemies many times (πολλάκις) and now, sorrowfully, he mentions them again in this very general way. Commentators express many different opinions as to who these enemies were. Some say Paul refers to the Jewish group that wanted to impose circumcision. Other commentators name a group of believers who deviated from and/or misinterpreted Paul's central message and became overly enthusiastic in their practice of spiritual gifts, forgetting the message of the cross (like some in the community in Corinth; 1 Cor 2:2). Another viewpoint sees the enemies as the Romans who cause suffering in the community at Philippi. Even serious study

of the verse does not help identify this group. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the community of Philippi knows exactly who these people are because Paul has already spoken about them many times. The enemies are "many," and the generality of the phrase may allude to people from Philippi as well as from all the other places Paul has been. It clearly causes Paul a great deal of sadness to mention these enemies, since he does so with tears, undoubtedly because they behave as enemies of the cross.

Since the polysemy of the passage supports any of the interpretations discussed here, intratextuality can help interpret Paul's thought more fully, as it has in other sections of this discussion. Some verses in Phil 1 and 2 lead to the conclusion that the Romans are the group that should not be imitated.[14] Paul indicates that the Romans intimidate and oppose the Philippian Christ-followers (1:28), and he would say that this points to their future destruction (ἀπώλεια) and also to the destruction (ἀπώλεια) of the enemies of the cross (3:19). In 1:27, members of the community are encouraged to lead a life (πολιτεύομαι) worthy of the gospel of Christ. Here in 3:20, Paul uses a cognate term to clarify the fact that the citizenship (πολίτευμα) of people involved in the movement of the gospel is heavenly. It is clear that in addressing his letter to people living in a Roman colony he is implicitly contrasting two kinds of citizenship. The citizens of the "heavenly state" include Paul, Epaphroditus, Timothy, Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, and other women and men—including Roman citizens of the community. The citizens of Rome outside the community include those who emphasize transient things such as status, power, and wealth and who vaunt them through extravagant, often orgiastic, banquets. Roman citizens also underestimate the cross, seeing it merely as a capital punishment for slaves and other low-status people. Philosophically, they consider the message of the cross to be worthless (1 Cor 1:23).

A large number of Roman citizens were scattered throughout the empire, including in officially designated Roman colonies. Since Paul's female companions know only too well who these people are in Philippi, Paul refrains from identifying this group in a letter written in a Roman prison that will be read by the soldier in charge of censorship. Paul feels sad and helpless when mentioning the enemies of the community in Philippi because he is powerless in prison, frustrated by not being able

14. See Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 194–95.

to do anything, knowing that his companions are suffering persecution. Philippians 3:20-21, the end of this chapter, is regarded by several commentators as an echo or fragment of a pre-Pauline hymn and verifies the claim that Roman citizens, especially those in Philippi, were enemies of the cross.

In these verses, Paul indirectly pits these two citizenships and their two saviors and lords against each other: the Roman citizenship under Caesar as opposed to the celestial citizenship with the Resurrected One. For Paul, Christ rules with power in the "heavenly state" or in the reign of the Divine, the state that can be equated with βασιλεία in the gospels.[15] The christological hymn in Phil 2:6-11 is obviously politically anti-empire. That political subtext reappears here in the figure of the vindicated Crucified One.[16] He is seen as the true Savior and Lord whose power subjects all things to himself, including the rule of Caesar (3:21).

Most important, as the dream and the expectation of a prisoner whose body is humbled by being in chains, this indicates that all members of the movement have a heavenly citizenship even though they live as foreigners within the earthly empire. They eagerly await the Lord Jesus Christ so that their humiliated bodies will be transformed into glorious, resurrected bodies similar (σύμμορφος) to that of Christ's. In this way an extraordinary inversion takes place. The human face of the Divine that took the form of a slave now rescues his people—slaves, mistreated prisoners, convicts, the persecuted, those who have been bullied for the sake of the Gospel—and transforms their bodies into resurrected bodies just like his. So they eagerly await that moment and behave according to the principles established by the alternative celestial state, which is radically democratic. With these affirmations, probably doxological, the recipients will gain hope and strength and a little peace.

I am aware that the assertion of Divine reign or dominion can be read and manipulated in terms of kyriarchy. In the case of political prisoners such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, however, the faith in heavenly citizenship is a way to feel empowered and affirmed in hope through the ultimate victory of divine solidarity. A few months before his death, as part of his declaration against Hitler, Bonhoeffer wrote, "This is only possible thanks to an enduring deep compassion. The rest is because God is the

15. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, BNTC (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 234.

16. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains*, 182.

ruler now and forever," and "God does not fulfill all our desires, but all his promises, that is, God remains the Lord of the earth."[17]

Firmness and Unity (4:1-3)

The whole section ends with an invitation to "stand firm in the Lord" (Phil 4:1), i.e., in Jesus Christ, the leader who already reigns in the midst of hostility. With great tenderness Paul encourages his companions to stand firm, repeating the word "beloved" twice. Paul uses six terms to describe his companions in this passage: "brothers and sisters," "joy," "crown," "my beloved," "loyal companion," and "co-workers." He longs for them, calls them his "joy and crown" (4:1). This is not simply rhetorical speech; the prisoner not only needs to reassure his loved ones as in a love letter; he also needs to remember them because the memory helps him cope with being in chains. From her experience as a hostage, Carmiña Navia notes, "Depending on others and their weapons and power generates fear, anguish, permanent questions, and a deep uncertainty because of not knowing one's fate. Clearly, if these feelings inhabit our body, they strengthen the bond between ourselves and the people we have momentarily lost but with whom we still interact, strengthening the ties with those we love . . . and more so if these people follow our fate and are committed to us, such as the community of the Philippians to whom Paul writes."

Paul's close ties of friendship with the community in Philippi become more palpable when he addresses them by name: Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, and a dear person called "loyal companion" (Phil 4:3), much as Epaphroditus was addressed in 2:25-30. The prisoner does not ask Euodia and Syntyche to think as he does but to overcome their differences and to reach agreement.[18] He requests a mediator to continue helping them (συλλαμβάνου, present imperative) to restore good relations between them. The dangerous situation of the community at Philippi apparent from the start of the letter requires this resolution, as does the threat of opposition groups like those who impose circumcision (3:2-7) or the Romans (3:19-20) who combat the ethical and theological principles adopted by the movement. Followers of the Resurrected One must try by all means to remain united and manage

17. Bonhoeffer, "August 10, 1944," "August 14, 1944," *Resistencia y sumisión*, 223–24.
18. Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, 113.

Philippians 4:1-3

[1]Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. [2]I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. [3]Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

their differences or their different personalities so that they do not weaken the movement.

To be strong and strive together, the members of the community must support each other in their weaknesses instead of getting caught up in secondary issues such as work styles or rivalries that lead them to diminish or lose their commitment to the cause. It is therefore important to Paul that his beloved colleagues experience the same feelings and have the same perception of things "in the Lord," i.e., in the communion they share in their commitment to the movement. With this, he alludes to the example of Jesus, who willingly left his privileged position and acted in humble solidarity with the outcasts of society (Phil 2:7).

The names Euodia and Syntyche are Greek, and they are found in inscriptions of the time. The fact that these women are named suggests that they were important leaders. According to Ben Witherington III, in Roman and Greek contexts, women were not to be mentioned except when they were either notable or notorious.[19] Several commentators highlight the leadership of women in Philippi at the socio-religious level as something remarkable in that city. Lilian Portefaix discusses the importance of the leadership role of women as priests of household deities (*sacra privata*) and also as priests at the public level (*sacra publica*) in official rites of deities that were protectors of the community and the state. Of course, this leadership was reserved for wealthy women who were property owners: "A married woman was powerful in the worship of her husband's deities who protected the house, and, furthermore, the possibility of achieving priestly office in the official cult existed only for those who were of high social position and owned property."[20] In spite of this, as Portefaix points out, Philippian women were attracted to mys-

19. Witherington, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 236–37.

20. Lilian Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice: Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as Seen by First-Century Philippian Women*, ConBNT 20 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988), 48.

tery religions. This is probably due to the feeling of independence they experienced outside the bounds of the patriarchal household and state.

In the movement of the Resurrected One, women did not have to be submissive wives in order to function as subjects of their own actions. At least at the beginning of Christianity, the ecclesia had not yet been institutionalized; among its tenets was the equality of all before the Divine and the right to heavenly citizenship for everyone. According to the principles of the ecclesia, there should be no difference between men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Greeks. It is therefore very likely that, since Euodia and Syntyche were mentioned by name, they were also part of the leadership of the community in Philippi as supervisors, elders, or deaconesses, functions mentioned in the salutation (Phil 1:1). They were certainly influential women, perhaps in charge of ministries such as administration, finance, hospitality, pastoral care, and teaching. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has written, "The Pauline literature and Acts still allow us to recognize that women were among the most prominent missionaries and leaders in the early Christian movement. They were apostles and ministers like Paul, and some were his co-workers. They were teachers, preachers, and competitors in the race of the gospel. They founded house churches and, as prominent patrons, used their influence for other missionaries and Christians."[21]

Philippians 4:2 is not clear about what kind of tensions were present between these two women. There is a great variety of opinions and suggestions in the commentaries. Some scholars think the tensions had to do with different positions regarding the mission of the Gospel, while others think it had to do with finances—whether to help Paul or not—or different viewpoints regarding relations with Roman citizens and their customs. It has also been suggested that the two women were on a mission together, so it could be the case that one of them was a benefactor who was trying to impose her judgment on the other because of her economic position, which the other resisted. This was not unusual in Christian communities in the beginning of Christianity,[22] and it also occurs today. The text is open to any of these interpretations.

Reading from the perspective of a political prisoner can help provide some indicators as to what is fundamental in the text. The issue is

21. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 183.

22. Elsa Tamez, *Luchas de poder en los orígenes del cristianismo: Un estudio de la Carta de 1 Timoteo* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2005), 37–42.

probably not important from a theological or ethical perspective because Paul does not side with either one of the women. He appreciates both equally, as colleagues and great contenders for the faith along with him. So he begs both of them specifically—"I urge," "I plead" (παρακαλῶ), is used with each of the names—to come to an agreement. The problem is also unlikely to be about economic aid to the prisoner, since Paul clearly esteems and admires both of them, just as they do him. So for the sake of friendship and for the good of the movement and life in the community, Paul urges them to overcome personal differences. Enough challenges arise from the hostilities of outside groups without adding another concern because of internal tensions.

From a feminist perspective, other possibilities emerge. For example, Bonnie Thurston and Judith M. Ryan find the passage important because there are no obvious restrictions on the leadership role.[23] Veronica Koperski sees evidence in the passage of the principle that before the Divine there is no difference between male and female (see Gal 3:28).[24] Paul clearly knows Euodia and Syntyche very well since he describes them with admiration as two great fighters who, like Clement and others in the community of Philippi, contended (συνήθλησάν) together with him for the cause of the gospel. Paul is not giving an order for the two women to be reconciled with each other. The imperative present is addressed to the "loyal companion" and indicates that reconciliation was already in process.[25] It is likely that Epaphroditus had told Paul about the tension between the two leaders and that the disagreement was on track to be resolved. It seems that it was a delicate matter, since Paul asks another person from the community to continue working as a mediator in the process of reconciliation between the two leaders.

It is very striking that Paul does not mention the loyal companion's name. "Syzygus" (γνήσιε σύζυγε) is not a proper name. Some people have thought that the transliteration of the Greek would give the name "Syzygus,"[26] but, as the majority of commentators have indicated, there is no similar name in extrabiblical sources. Two questions come to mind:

23. Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 10 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 142.

24. Veronica Koperski, "Feminist Concerns and the Authorial Readers in Philippians," *LS* 17 (1992): 269–71.

25. Charles B. Cousar, *Philippians and Philemon: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 82.

26. See Jerusalem Bible translation.

who is Paul referring to, and why did he not mention this person's name? Presumably, the community and Paul knew exactly who this person was, but there is no agreement among commentators as to this person's identification. Some have proposed Epaphroditus, who probably brought Paul's letter to Philippi. But it would be strange for Paul to refer to him in the vocative case when he knew Epaphroditus was not in Philippi but in the city where Paul was in prison. The name of Luke has also been proposed.[27] Although the adjective "loyal" is masculine, women have been proposed, such as "Paul's wife" and Lydia. Origen thought that the expression could refer to "Paul's wife." This viewpoint is based on the fact that σῦζογος is sometimes translated as "spouse" in extrabiblical documents. If the two words were in the feminine, then Lydia would be the most logical person because she was the founder of the community according to Acts 16:13-15, 40.

Clement, Origen of Alexandria, and, later, Erasmus and Renan all thought that Lydia was the mediator.[28] Besides being the founder of the community whose home served as the meeting place of the ecclesia in Philippi, this enterprising woman was the benefactor who welcomed Paul and Silas to her home. In Acts, her hospitality is mentioned twice: when these two missionaries first arrived at Philippi and later when they were released from prison there (16:15, 40). In addition, there was a close relationship between Paul and Lydia. She was a leader in the community and certainly had great strength of character as she strongly "prevailed upon" (παραβιάζομαι) Paul and Silas to stay at her house (16:15).

She was also a brave woman because she offered them the protection of her home,[29] even though they were considered subversive elements in Roman culture. According to the accusations of the owner of a slave girl who made a business of selling her powers as a clairvoyant, Paul freed the girl from "a spirit of divination" (Acts 16:16-21). The owner publicly accused Paul and Silas of promoting customs that were contrary to Roman custom. Lydia was not worried about being rejected or about getting dragged into conflict with the people of the city because of her involvement with the men opposed by the rioters. For this reason it is not frivolous to think that Lydia is the "loyal companion" Paul mentions. Because of censorship, Paul would have avoided naming Lydia in his

27. Fee, *Comentario*, 494.

28. Quoted by Reumann, *Philippians*, 628.

29. Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Vida das mulheres na sociedade e na Igreja: Uma exegese feminista de Atos dos Apóstolos* (São Leopoldo: Paulinas, 1995), 25–26.

letter in order to protect her identity, and he could also have used the masculine gender to divert attention from her, since the community was not very large and the leadership of women was notable.

Considering all that has been said about prisons in the Roman Empire and the letters or documents coming from prisoners, it is easy to understand why Paul treats this person in such a way as to protect her safety. As mentioned in the introduction, writing from prison was dangerous for both the prisoners and their recipients due to the censorship of documents by officials, judges, and Roman soldiers. In his letter, Paul is careful when he mentions his colleague so that she or he is not seen as an enemy of the empire. Perhaps Paul was explicit in using the names of Eudoia, Clement, and Syntyche because they, unlike his "loyal companion," were not on any list of named suspects against the empire. In his letter, "loyal companion" serves as a kind of password that is only understood by the sender and his recipients.

Modern political prisoners also use such tactics to cope with danger and censorship. From her experience as a prisoner in a women's prison in Colombia, Neila Serrano says: "All the letters you write in prison are read. You know that the letter you send is going to be read by a guard designated for this purpose. The letter I send can have any one of three destinations: one is that it is vetoed and not sent; another that it could be used to implicate others; or finally, that one in which it arrives at its destination. Therefore, as a prisoner one learns a special language in order to say things that someone else can understand, but not the jailer who reads it."[30] Bonhoeffer used the code words "Gert problem" to refer to the persecution of the Jews.[31] On July 8, 1944, he wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge, "Soon we will have to think about the trip we took in the summer of 1940 and my last preaching"; he was referring to Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia and the attack the resistance had planned for July 20, 1944.[32]

30. Neila Serrano, "Mi experiencia en la cárcel a la luz de Filipenses," interview with the author, Medellin, Colombia, September 2013, 6.a.

31. Bonhoeffer, *Resistencia y sumisión*, 116.

32. Ibid., 199.

Philippians 4:4-23

Words of Gratitude and Farewell

Final Words (4:4-9)

The Importance of Remaining Calm (4:4-7)

The final words of Paul's letter to the Philippians begin with a repeated invitation to be joyful. It is the leitmotif that runs throughout the letter, as I have been noting. The repetition is rhetorically appealing: "Rejoice . . . again I will say [πάλιν εἶπον], rejoice" (4:4). The call is to have a happy spirit at all times (πάντοτε), meaning in private and in public, in pleasant and in adverse circumstances. I have said that joy and happiness is part of a constant theme that runs through the letters of political prisoners. In the midst of misfortune, persecution, and possible death sentences, prisoners draw strength from writing or talking about joy in order to deal with both present and future pain. But their concern is not so much with their own situation as it is with that of their recipients, particularly their loved ones or companions. So they invite their recipients to let go of the sadness brought on by imprisonment and persecution, and they encourage them to rejoice. They suffer because of what might happen to their recipients and implore them not to worry about them or about other events that may take place.

Paul also encourages his recipients to "not worry [μεριμνᾶτε] about anything" (Phil 4:6). "Anything" means everything in Paul's situation,

Philippians 4:4-9

4Rejoice in the Lord always; again
I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentle-
ness be known to everyone. The Lord
is near. 6Do not worry about anything,
but in everything by prayer and sup-
plication with thanksgiving let your re-
quests be made known to God. 7And
the peace of God, which surpasses all
understanding, will guard your hearts
and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8Finally, beloved, whatever is true,
whatever is honorable, whatever is
just, whatever is pure, whatever is
pleasing, whatever is commendable,
if there is any excellence and if there is
anything worthy of praise, think about
these things. 9Keep on doing the things
that you have learned and received
and heard and seen in me, and the
God of peace will be with you.

including the judiciary process, Epaphroditus's illness, the possibility that the cause of the Gospel might lose ground, and, above all, the intimidation that they are suffering at the hands of the Romans. Nevertheless, the invitation to joy does not prevent the prisoner from collapsing during times of loneliness, as happens to most prisoners. Neila Serrano explains it from her experience, and she is sure that Paul may have felt the same way. "All day my mission was to smile and lift their spirits, but I collapsed several times. [. . .] I guess that it was the same with Paul. Paul spoke of the strength of the Lord, but Paul had to have moments when he felt lonely and when he asked himself: is it worth it? . . . For however great your faith, there are times when you wonder if God really exists, and why you are here undergoing this suffering."[1]

Between the call to be joyful and the exhortation not to worry, Paul tells his companions to make their goodwill known to everyone. In other words, it is not just about making the effort to let joy overcome sadness; joy must also invade the whole person and must be reflected in ways of living and acting. This is important because in times of tension or conflict between groups, harshness, bitterness, and resentment easily overpower those who suffer marginalization. Paul invites his companions who are part of the movement in Philippi to be known more for their kindness and humility (Phil 4:5), qualities that must be shown not only to the members of the community but also to outsiders, even those who cause suffering. Therefore he immediately proclaims, "The Lord is near." The

1. Neila Serrano, "Mi experiencia en la cárcel a la luz de Filipenses," interview with the author, Medellin, Colombia, September 2013.

phrase can be interpreted temporally, that is, the suffering will soon end because the end time is not far away.

The hope of resurrection, as underlined in this letter (Phil 3:10, 21), is made stronger by declaring that the movement's leader will soon arrive, meaning that the arrival has a close temporal proximity. But the phrase may also be interpreted regarding spatial proximity, since the Spirit of the risen Christ is nearby, accompanying them. She, the Spirit, is with them to strengthen and comfort them.[2] It is therefore possible to rejoice in the midst of hostility and be kind to others because the "Lord" is close to them and empowers them. Because both spatial and temporal proximity may be present, both prisoners and the persecuted can affirm that they feel close to the Divine and simultaneously place their hope in the resurrection of the dead, which will occur with the coming of the Lord. Politically speaking, the use of the term "Lord" and his spatial proximity refers back to the comparison that was made earlier in the letter between Jesus and Caesar as "lord." The idolized figure of Caesar is not at all close (spatial proximity) to his people, and most of the time his arrival (temporal proximity) in the provinces causes fear instead of relief, peace, and joy.

Holding on to either of the two dimensions of the nearness of the "Lord" helps reduce concerns and fears among members of the community at Philippi, but for Paul the most effective way to achieve peace and joy is through prayer (Phil 4:6). When he prays, he feels close to the Divine who cares for all creatures. Paul puts his concerns and needs into the Divine's hands, which psychologically creates a sense of liberation. Therefore, while urging his recipients to rejoice (4:4), be kind (4:5), and not to worry (4:6), Paul insists that they also come into contact with the Divine through prayer. He uses three different Greek words (προσευχῇ, δέησις, αἴτημα) to enter into dialogue with the Divine. He does not specify the content of the requests, but it can be deduced from the context that he would be praying for protection, courage, strength, health—especially for Epaphroditus—freedom for Paul's fellow prisoner and friend, and, in addition, the material support the Philippian community requires to survive and help others like Paul.

To put their concerns into the hands of the Divine brings the peace that can come only from the Divine (ἐν εἰρήνη τοῦ θεοῦ; Phil 4:7). This

2. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians,* BNTC (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 245.

is the only place this phrase occurs in the New Testament; usually it is "the God of peace" that appears in the text, or, as I prefer, "the Divine One of peace." But that is exactly what the companions of Philippi need, a peace that is different from the vaunted peace of the *pax romana* imposed on the conquered.[3] The broader meaning of the Hebrew *shalom* encompasses well-being at all levels and means peace that "exceeds human imagination."[4] In the Nasa Yuwe language of the Colombian Nasa culture, the term "peace" (*wet fxi'ziñi*) translates as "live in delicious harmony."[5] In the Quechua language, *Sumak Kawsay* means "living well in harmony." In the words of indigenous peoples,

> The *Sumak Kawsay* is carved from the ancient wisdom from the people of the indigenous nationalities. It is a more ancient word and one that is lived, which proposes a community lifestyle that includes thinking, feeling, and acting in harmony, just like a woven cloth that covers and shelters a person like a *poncho* in various colors. It confronts the current model of development, consumerism, individualism, commercialism, and the competition that reduces the land, water, and the culture and wisdom of the indigenous people to simple resources that should be at the disposal and use of those in power.[6]

The only peace the Philippian companions have seen firsthand is the pacification of rebellions against the empire. In contrast, peace from the Divine is a different kind of peace, one that protects in every way.

Here, Paul refers specifically to how the Divine "will guard your minds and your hearts" (Phil 4:7) from anxieties and concerns. For modern readers, the mind is the center of thinking, and the heart is the center of feeling. In ancient times, the heart was also considered to be the seat of the will. Many commentators point out that the Greek verb used in the promise of v. 7 is a military one: to guard or defend (φρουρέω) something, for example, as Roman garrisons guarded or protected a town against

3. Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 11–18.

4. Charles B. Cousar, *Philippians and Philemon: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 86.

5. The expression is translated into Spanish as *vivir sabroso* (literally, "live deliciously").

6. AELAPI, "Sumak Kawsay y Vida Plena:" Memoria Borrador, VII Encuentro Continental de Teología India (Continental Conference of Indigenous Theology), Ecuador, October 2013. http://www.padrenello.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/VII-Encontro-Continental-de-Teologia-%C3%8Dndia-Ebook-em-Espanhol.pdf?iframe=true&width=90%&height=90%.

enemy attacks. But here, Paul's use of the military metaphor excludes the bloodshed of military conflicts. Rather, it is the peace of the Divine that is like a shield that keeps the community safe, protected from retaliation. This peace is granted through prayer and will keep them free from worries and anxieties as well as help them to be loving toward everyone, even their opponents. All this is possible thanks to their commitment to the cause of the Gospel and their connection with Christ Jesus (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ).

The Exercise of Citizenship Worthy of the Gospel (4:8-9)

When thoughts are free of anxieties and concerns, minds are liberated and people are free to do good and behave in ways that are worthy of the gospel. Doing good is a very abstract concept, but when it is combined with behavior that is worthy of the gospel, "good" is translated into the ethics of justice and care for each other. The prisoner now invites his recipients to continue to take into account (λογίζεσθε, present imperative) what is "true," "honorable," "just," "pure," "pleasing," "commendable," and "excellent" as well as "anything worthy of praise" (Phil 4:8), everything that has to do with an ethic that will make them worthy of being members of the movement of the Resurrected One. In this list of virtues, Paul uses well-known ethical concepts of the Stoics or Cynics from the Greco-Roman tradition. Most commentators call attention to this terminology because Paul normally did not cite Greco-Roman concepts. Nevertheless, this is understandable in a letter from prison. A good strategy for avoiding accusations of inciting an open rebellion against the empire was to recommend that his recipients govern their lives by "the highest standards of morality and culture"[7] known in all Roman cities. The prisoner, who presented himself as a slave (1:1), wrote of the importance of humility and of the Divine who became a slave (2:7). His real message represents a value that was not welcome in Roman culture and was not present among the virtues worthy of imitation.

A letter that has this type of appeal will pass Roman censorship. Moreover, the values Paul lists are the same values that he himself puts into practice. For example, in Phil 4:9, he clarifies the fact that the recipients have seen these same values in him and have learned them from him, their own companion who has fought for the cause of the gospel. The

7. Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 253.

connection between the values of Greco-Roman culture and the values that Paul proposes from his own Jewish tradition already exists, since anything that leads to solidarity, justice, peace, mercy, and purity of heart is good.

He finishes the verse by alluding to the Divine One of Peace, "the God of Peace" (Phil 4:7). He emphasizes that the community's peace comes from the Divine by using a phrase that focuses on the Divine, who offers peace. When ethical values are put into practice, then Divine peace takes the place of resentment, retaliation, and, therefore, violence. Again, the meanings of peace that both Paul and his recipients were familiar with are hidden between the lines of Paul's letter. According to Witherington, the *pax romana* is a parody of the *pax Christi*, for the peace that comes from the Divine is not imposed by tyranny and terror; instead it offers transforming love.[8]

Gratitude: Timely and Exemplary Solidarity (4:10-20)

Paul ends the letter to the Philippians by referring to the financial support that was brought to him by Epaphroditus from the community in Philippi. The way he refers to it—omitting the customary effusive thanks and placing his first reference to the donation at the end of the letter—has caused surprise and confusion among the commentators. Several explanations have been proposed. Some postulate a separate letter based on the theory that Philippians is really three letters. Others suggest that there is a difference in cultural background between Paul and the Philippians, or perhaps a different type of relationship between them, such as a financial contract, a patronage relation, or a relation of friendship, each with its corresponding letter style.[9] Moisés Silva prefers to read Philippians from a theological and ministerial perspective.[10] Since all proposals are speculative reconstructions, I propose other reasons that take into account the circumstances involved in writing a letter from prison. I set aside the financial language of patronage and friendship

8. Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 257.

9. See John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 33B (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 693–724.

10. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 205–8.

Philippians 4:10-20

[10]I rejoice in the Lord greatly that
now at last you have revived your
concern for me; indeed, you were con-
cerned for me, but had no opportunity
to show it. [11]Not that I am referring to
being in need; for I have learned to be
content with whatever I have. [12]I know
what it is to have little, and I know what
it is to have plenty. In any and all cir-
cumstances I have learned the secret
of being well-fed and of going hungry,
of having plenty and of being in need.
[13]I can do all things through him who
strengthens me. [14]In any case, it was
kind of you to share my distress.

[15]You Philippians indeed know
that in the early days of the gospel,
when I left Macedonia, no church
shared with me in the matter of giv-
ing and receiving, except you alone.
[16]For even when I was in Thessalonica,
you sent me help for my needs more
than once. [17]Not that I seek the gift,
but I seek the profit that accumulates
to your account. [18]I have been paid in
full and have more than enough; I am
fully satisfied, now that I have received
from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a
fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable
and pleasing to God. [19]And my God
will fully satisfy every need of yours ac-
cording to his riches in glory in Christ
Jesus. [20]To our God and Father be
glory forever and ever. Amen.

letters and instead analyze Philippians as a whole and this ending in particular as characteristic of a letter from a prisoner.

Contemporary political prisoners help explain the situation Paul describes. Given the conditions in which they live as prisoners, the inner strength they experience is so powerful that it relativizes absolutely everything material in their lives, and they assert that their strength comes from the Divine. The young Jewish woman Etty Hillesum wrote from the Westerbork concentration camp to her friends Johanna and Klass Smelik on Saturday, July 3, 1943: "Yes, the misery is great and still . . . I feel rising up in my heart a fascination I cannot avoid. It comes from an elementary force: life is wonderful and great. We must build a new world after the war."[11] The force of their faith keeps the prisoners focused and calm. And paradoxically they do not hide their exuberant joy when they receive some small gift, such as cookies, a book, or a flower, because behind it stand the people who are sending it. That is why a letter or a visit causes such joy, and the happiness lasts for days.

11. Etty Hillesum, *El corazón pensante de los barracones: Cartas* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2001), 99.

Like all prisoners, Paul is hungry and needy (see the Introduction). Timothy is with him and does what he can to help him survive, but Paul has not heard from his companions in the nearby city of Philippi in a long time, possibly since he was taken prisoner. The likely reason is that they had not heard that he was in prison. When they did hear the news, they gathered together a financial gift and sent Epaphroditus immediately to assist him. As witnesses to what happened to Paul previously in Philippi, they knew what it meant to be chained in a Roman prison (Acts 16:22-24). They understood what was happening to Paul and sympathized with him. Paul overflows (μεγάλως) with joy (Phil 4:10) when he hears from them, not so much because of the economic assistance, but because he now has community news and realizes that his companions have not forgotten him, they are not ashamed of his chains, and they have rekindled the relationship they have always had with him. Epaphroditus updates Paul about all that has been happening, of his commitment to the movement, and also about the tensions and dangers for the community at Philippi, both external and internal, that have developed because of the Gospel. Paul is very happy because he realizes that they had not forgotten him but had not had the opportunity to get in touch with him in prison.

Paul does not speak directly about the donation Epaphroditus delivered, but his language clearly indicates that the revival of the relationship includes financial assistance. This is logical, not only because the community at Philippi has helped him in the past (4:15-16), but also because the prisoner, like every prisoner, needs economic solidarity. Although the joy and the donation are two different things, they are united by the friendship behind the gift. In all the testimonies of political prisoners, they are disproportionately happy for any little thing they receive from their loved ones. The narrow, dingy prison space without the colors of nature or the blue sky compels them to magnify any object that comes into their hands. For this reason, the Spanish prisoner Marcos Ana, who fought against Franco's dictatorship and spent twenty-three years in prison in Burgos, titled his memoirs from prison *Tell Me, What Is a Tree Like?*[12]

Just because Paul does not directly thank people in Philippi does not mean he is ungrateful. For him the most important thing is the relationship with the community. His phrase "I have learned to be content with

12. My translation. Marcos Ana, *Decidme cómo es un árbol: Memoria de la prisión y la vida* (Barcelona: Umbriel, 2007).

whatever I have" means that he has learned to deal with all kinds of material circumstances, whether adverse or favorable. Rather than accept his circumstances with stoical self-sufficiency, he affirms in Phil 4:13 that his empowerment[13] comes from the Divine. He repeats this three times, with paired expressions: "little" versus "plenty"; "well-fed" versus "going hungry"; "plenty" versus "being in need" (4:12). Although this is the case, he writes more about the difficult conditions he experiences as an apostle (see 2 Cor 1:8-10) than about his times of abundance.

Paul does not effusively thank the community at Philippi for their economic solidarity as might be expected of a prisoner. He simply acknowledges their gift (Phil 4:18). Instead, he thanks them indirectly through various allusions. Among them is the joy of his growing relationship with Epaphroditus because of his visit and support (4:10). He also feels satisfaction because he now knows the community is united with him in the oppression (θλῖψις) he suffers in prison (4:14). And he mentions that their donation is an acceptable offering pleasing to the Divine (4:18).

Paul does not show his appreciation as he ought to according to accepted practice at the time, and his reason is perhaps twofold. First, he might not want to alert his captors to what he has received. In prisons it is not unusual for guards or other officials to rob prisoners, and bribery has existed since time immemorial. Second, Paul knows that the majority of the members of the community of Philippi are poor,[14] that their support of him is solidarity among the poor. In addition, Paul's correspondence with communities in Corinth indicates that he did not like to receive money for his ministry. He rejected honoraria from the Corinthians in order to maintain his independence as an apostle. Paul may not want the Philippians to send more money than necessary both to maintain his independence and so that they are not further disadvantaged by his economic needs.

Nevertheless, Paul does greatly value the amount he has received and is grateful for it. He says that what Epaphroditus brought him was more than enough (4:18) and that he sees it as an offering to the Divine that is pleasing and acceptable. This cultic image is also present in Phil 2:17 where Paul describes his own life and his ministry to the newly founded faith community in Philippi as an offering to the Divine. In the same

13. Term used by Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 10 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 153.

14. Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter,* SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 99–101.

sense Paul uses the term λειτουργός, meaning "priestly service," when he relates that Epaphroditus "ministers" to the needs of the prisoner, a ministry that is seen as something sacred. The community's gift to Paul is therefore a mutual solidarity. Accordingly, Paul says they did well to inform him about their suffering, which includes the problems they are presently experiencing because of their participation in the movement of the Resurrected One, such as feeling the pain of a starving prisoner.

This sharing in solidarity (συγκοινωνέω) is typical of the very special relationship that Paul has with the community at Philippi. These are relations of mutuality and reciprocity, which he expressed in terms of "profit to your account" (4:17). Although the language is specific to business relationships, it should not be viewed as such in this context. The content of the letter, which speaks of commitment to the cause of the Gospel, does not allow a corporate interpretation. The Philippian believers are committed to the cause from the beginning, that is, ever since they joined the movement of the Resurrected One, and a mutual relationship with Paul was established. Even though the material need of the prisoner is obvious, Paul puts the emphasis on his mutual relationship with them as he points out that the most important thing is not their gift but their commitment to the movement, which is seen in their solidarity with him. As Paul explains, his gain is also a "profit" for them (4:17).

No one knows exactly why Paul had a preference for his relationship with the Philippian ἐκκλησία over other communities in the movement. Perhaps it was because most of the believers in Philippi were women, and Paul usually had a good relationship with women, as is evident in Rom 16:1-15.[15] Though the reason remains obscure, there must have been something very positive between Paul and the Philippians so that their friendship in a relation of equality deepened over several years. Though they already know (οἴδατε, Phil 4:15) this, he reminds them that their relationship began when they first got involved with him in the movement.

Paul also notes that this is not the first time that they have expressed their solidarity with Paul in his need. According to Acts, Lydia took him into her house and did not reject him despite the tumult his preaching caused in Philippi because it was considered to be anti-Roman (16:15, 40), though he does not explicitly mention this incident in the letter. Paul reminds them that they began to show solidarity with him financially when he was in Thessalonica. Before he left Macedonia, they sent

15. A possible exception could be the women leaders in Corinth, according to Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

donations to him more than once (ἅπαξ καί δίς; Phil 4:16). Although the aid was for basic necessities, it was not separate from his mission as a promoter of the movement of the Resurrected One. Paul does not consider these donations an expression of solidarity independent from his relationship with the Divine because, as Paul suggests, it is the Divine who will reward his donors reciprocally (4:19). Since the Divine knows he is a prisoner whose condition prevents him from rewarding them materially himself, he assures them that she will repay them abundantly (πληρώσει, 4:19).

The affirmation of reciprocity between Paul and the community at Philippi is mediated by the rich and powerful Divine. In addition, the reciprocity through communion with Christ leads the prisoner to conclude the letter with a doxology (Phil 4:20) directed to the Divine under the analogy of Father. This can be interpreted in two ways. This praise to the Divine as "father" follows the common patriarchal language of the time. Modern readers can see the term as signifying that she is "our parent" who adopted daughters and sons as sisters and brothers in the same family. This parental role of the Divine emphasizes the fraternal relationship among the movement's members, even if the image of the patriarchal house is retained. The other possible interpretation of "father" has a political tinge to it because to deliberately call the Divine "Father" is to oppose the Roman emperors who assumed the title of *paterfamilias* of the entire Roman Empire.[16] Both interpretations fit well with the contents of the letter, which emphasizes, on the one hand, the relationship of equality and mutuality between the Philippian community and the prisoner and, on the other hand, the superiority of the crucified One over "Eternal Rome" and her emperor as lord and *paterfamilias.* This final passage completes the letter's argument that the resurrected One is the actual Lord of the universe.

Farewell (4:21-23)

The farewell is fairly short, but it contains some interesting details. The prisoner continues his signature style: an adaptation of Hellenistic letters that includes the desire for the grace of Christ Jesus to be with his recipients in both the initial greeting (Phil 1:1) and the farewell (4:23). Among

16. There is one inscription with the decree of Epaminondas of Acrephia, the high priest of Nero and the Augustes, in which Nero is named as "Lord of the Universe," "Father of all," and "New Helios" (*IG* VII, 2713), J. M. Cortés Copete, "Nerón libera Grecia," in *Epigrafía griega* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1999), 381–87.

Philippians 4:21-23

21Greet every saint in Christ Jesus.
The friends who are with me greet you.
22All the saints greet you, especially
those of the emperor's household.
23The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
be with your spirit.

the striking details here, it is significant that Paul does not mention the names of those who have sent him greetings or those to whom he sends greetings. According to the perspective of reading the letter as one written from prison, Paul knows that his letter should not reveal information about his contacts. He has already mentioned some names, like Timothy, Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement, but he was careful not to reveal the name of the "faithful friend." The less information, the better.

Nevertheless, Paul does communicate greetings from some believers (ἅγιοι) who are "those of the emperor's household" (Phil 4:22). It is strange that he puts them into a special group, separated from others (ἀδελφοί) in the community of believers who are with him or nearby. This may be a strategy similar to that of 1:13 where Paul mentions that the whole prison guard has recognized the cause of the gospel as a result of his imprisonment. Paul might have had more than one purpose in mentioning the Roman guards at the beginning of his letter and the believers in the household of Caesar in his farewell. He might wish to reassure his companions in the movement in Philippi that the gospel is advancing and that it has entered the "heart of the Roman Empire"[17] through some government workers such as soldiers, slaves, and free people in Caesar's household. Note that the elite are nearly absent from this group of believers.[18] Another purpose could be simply to confuse the censor into believing that the Gospel promoted by the movement of the Resurrected One is not a threat, since even some of his own people are both loyal to Caesar and in agreement with the movement. Of course,

17. Gordon D. Fee, *Comentario de la Epístola a los Filipenses*, Colección teológica contemporánea, trans. Dora González and Ismael López (Barcelona: CLIE, 2004), 571.

18. According to Peter Oakes, in the church of Philippi, in addition to the poor, slaves, and artisans, there could have been farmers who owned or rented land but they were not rich; the majority of them, according to him, "would be at or close to a subsistence level," although surely there would be others in much better condition. Most could hardly be among the elite, since the elite would be only 1% of the population from the lower order of decurions (local councilors) downward, as Oakes believes. *Philippians: From People to Letter*, 61.

this could be quite counterproductive if a suspicious officer relates it to the political statement of the Christological hymn in 2:5-11.

Even though Paul does not name anyone in the farewell closing, he still sends greetings to each individual recipient: "Greet every [πάντα] saint [ἅγιον] in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:21). "Every saint" can be translated "to each of the sisters and brothers," meaning everyone involved in the movement of the Resurrected One. Paul also sends greetings from other people besides himself. He divides them into three groups. First, Paul says, "the friends who are with me greet you" (4:21), meaning his closest group. Since Epaphroditus carried the letter to Philippi, he is not included in this first group. Up to this point the letter recipients might not have realized that Timothy was not the only believer who was with Paul, and there may have been others who lived in the nearby city who visited Paul in prison, such as Priscilla and Aquila or other companions who were active in the movement. In the letter to the Romans Paul clearly says that Priscilla and Aquila risked their lives for him (Rom 16:3-4). He prefers not to mention names, though, so as not to put anyone at risk.

Of the second group, Paul says, "all the saints greet you" (Phil 4:22). He is referring to the community of believers in the city where he is imprisoned. As indicated by several commentators, that is "a conventional saying" since surely some, especially those "who would preach out of selfish ambition" (1:17), might not wish to be included in a letter from a prisoner. Even so, mentioning this group suggests that it is important for Paul to emphasize the unity and solidarity within the community of followers of the Resurrected One. Paul's third group is "especially those of the emperor's household" (4:22). It may be true that some slaves and free men and women in the emperor's service sympathized with the movement and were part of the local community. It is also possible that Paul took advantage of that fact, since they were probably very few in number, and he may have referred to them as a strategy to avoid causing suspicion among the Roman guards.

The prisoner closes his epistolary discourse with his well-known wish that "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (4:23).

Conclusion

As I said in my introduction, my discussion here presents a feminist-ideological hermeneutic. The starting point is a reading of the letter to the Philippians as a document written in prison. My feminist approach required attention to gendered language, including choosing the term "the Divine" instead of "God" in order to make the reference more inclusive. The letter was analyzed in its final redaction rather than as separate letters. Prison and "chains" have been treated as a theological location, regardless of the geographical location in either Ephesus or Rome. The implications of an analysis of this kind have led me to research types of prisons in antiquity, charges against prisoners, censorship of writings sent from jail, and risks facing recipients of letters from those charged with *maiestas*, i.e., treason against the emperor.

As a member of the restive Jewish minority, Paul was a known leader of the movement of Christ, the Resurrected One, a small movement that proclaimed a different lifestyle in keeping with the Gospel and opposed to the Roman Empire. Paul contrasted a heavenly citizenship in a radically democratic state with a Roman citizenship in the empire. In addition, Paul persuaded Jews and non-Jews that the Resurrected One was Lord and Savior, crucified by the Romans and vindicated by God. According to my study, when Paul composed the letter together with Timothy, he was suffering military custody, which meant he was chained to one or two soldiers, by the legs and/or arms. While he waited for judgment, Paul was preparing his defense and, from evidence in his letter, he was expecting a possible death sentence. For all these reasons, I have referred to Paul throughout this discussion as a political prisoner.

Paul's letter was addressed to the community of Christ-followers in Philippi, which was composed mostly of women and led by women. Paul's letter goes first to these sisters, companions in the movement of the Resurrected One. As inhabitants of a Roman colony, they lived in an environment hostile to the movement and faced the same risks as Paul, because they were targeted as active members of the same movement. Along with their leaders Lydia, Euodia, and Syntyche, they stood with Paul, praying and sending money to him with their companion Epaphroditus. It is possible that they did this because the image was still fresh in their minds of Paul and Silas under arrest in Philippi, stripped naked, whipped, and locked in a dungeon with their feet fastened in stocks (Acts 16:23-24).

In addition to ancient sources regarding prisons, I included voices of modern women and men prisoners who helped reveal the physical and psychological situation of persons deprived of their liberty because of their ideas. In this sense I established a method of interpretation that is both intra- and intertextual, weaving networks of prisoner texts that echo each other, saturating the senses with the thoughts and emotions of people in prison. In this way, I uncovered recurring themes in letters from prisoners, such as an experience of inner strength, a permanent concern for persons on the outside—family, friends, or companions in a movement—the reiteration of the word "joy" to strengthen themselves and calm the anxiety of recipients, the uncertainty about what will happen to them, the management of time, and exhortations addressed to recipients.

As in any social movement, there are a variety of currents visible both within the movement of the Resurrected One and outside it. In the letter, I noted three opposition groups: one composed of non-Jews and Jews within the movement; another, also inside the movement, composed of Jews who proposed higher membership requirements; and another outside the movement composed of Romans who were radically opposed to the movement. Paul rejects the second and third groups.

I have analyzed the letter in sections, following the same logic throughout. In short, Paul greets his companions in Philippi and sends them news about his personal situation and the events around him in order to help them keep calm. Before his farewell, Paul thanks the Philippian community for their timely and exemplary solidarity in sending him money for his basic needs. Paul strongly urges them to maintain unity and encourages them to continue in the struggle while making them aware of the risks they are running. Paul also reminds them of the cause they are struggling for. He urges them to follow in the footsteps of the

Crucified and Resurrected One who, being Divine, expressed solidarity with human beings by taking on the form of a slave. The Crucified One was vindicated by the resurrection and exalted to the highest degree, higher than that of any emperor. This political statement was dangerous in Roman times because of the rampant abuse of the *maiestas* accusation, which compounded the importance of encouraging followers of Jesus to live in harmony and in solidarity within the movement in Philippi. Members of the community must shine like stars in a hostile society that is opposed to the principles of the movement of the Resurrected One. Amid these recommendations, and his warnings against opposition groups, Paul does theology from his wounded and chained body; he sees the suffering of the Crucified One and hopes to reach the resurrection also.

Authors' Introduction to Colossians

The Challenge of Colossians for Feminist Commentary: Subordinates Submit

Paul's Letter to the Colossians poses a particular challenge for feminist commentary. Positioned in the New Testament canon among the letters of Paul and treated in the early history of interpretation in continuity with Paul's authoritative teaching, the letter instructs wives to be "subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (3:18), children to "obey your parents in everything" (3:20), and slaves to "obey your earthly masters in everything . . . fearing the Lord" (3:22). The exhortation to obedience is addressed to the hierarchically structured pairs—wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters—and provided solid support for the ordering of the Christian family and the organization of the church for many centuries. Further buttressed by the Christological elaboration by the author of Ephesians (Eph 5:21–6:9), the structure of subordination and super-ordination and the parallel sets of relationships of wife/husband, child/parent, slave/master shaped and limited the way that family and church could be imagined and lived out.

The proper order of male and female in leadership in the church, within the household, and in society continues to be a contested issue around the world. Traditional interpretation of Christian Scripture has reinforced subordination of wives to husbands and limited or prohibited

the exercise of leadership by women. When slavery was accepted as essential to Christian society, New Testament injunctions to slaves to submit to masters legitimized the institution.

Feminist commentary on Colossians must address these instructions because of the enormous impact they have had upon the lives of subordinate members of the patriarchal household and kyriarchal society throughout history, and because of the ways these texts continue to be deployed in political argument today. The term "kyriarchal" derives from the terms κύριος ("lord") and ἄρχειν ("to rule") and refers to the interlocking relationships of domination and subordination. Feminist biblical interpretation of early Christian literature, both the New Testament writings and extra-canonical writings, has traced how the early communities contested gender roles, the status of marriage, and structures of religious authority from the earliest generations of the Jesus movement until today. The ancient debates and struggles that are inscribed in the New Testament writings are ongoing in the present.[1]

Historical biblical scholars who do not identify as feminist have recognized the problem of the subordination teaching in Colossians. As Christian societies rejected the system of masters and slaves as an essential constitutive element of society and church, and as they have begun to revise ideals of marriage away from subordination and toward mutuality, the exhortations to subordinates in a letter of Paul to be submissive appeared as a difficulty for interpretation. In the modern period, biblical scholars have accounted for these instructions primarily by finding "explanations" for the exhortation in the social-historical context that they reconstruct. Feminist interpreters have employed historical and hermeneutical strategies to understand, translate, contextualize, or repudiate this exhortation.[2] Recent commentators have found ways to soften,

The authors are grateful for the assistance of Hunter Ruffin and Neal McGowan in the preparation of this commentary.

1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), ix–xxv.

2. Influential feminist readings of Colossians include Angela Standhartinger, "Colossians: The Origin of the Table of Household Duties," in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 796–809; E. Elizabeth Johnson, "Colossians," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 585–87; and Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Colossians," in *Searching the Scriptures*: *A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 313–24.

subordinate, or sideline the submission teaching by emphasizing Paul's overarching anti-imperial, countercultural message.[3]

Feminist Commentary: Critical, Constructive, and Intentional

Feminist commentary is not satisfied with resolving historical issues about difficult texts. Rather, it takes seriously the character of Colossians as Scripture read by women in communities of faith for meaning, sustenance, direction, and hope. Therefore, feminism is critical: it seeks to critique patterns of thought in Colossians that define women as inferior to men, and slaves inferior to free, barbarian inferior to Greek. Feminism is also constructive: it seeks resources in Colossians to build a vision of equality in which all can flourish.[4] Aware of our rhetorical role, this commentary participates in the public discussion and debate about interpreting Colossians and seeks to invite its readers into the reading process.

Therefore, this commentary on Colossians is not completed by wrestling with the instructions in Col 3:18–4:3. Rather we read the letter as a whole, searching beyond the command to obedience to find echoes of alternative voices, traces of women's activity and leadership within the ecclesia, countertraditions of equality and assertions of freedom, and ways to recover and discover resources for abundant life and thriving for women and men. Feminist commentary acknowledges that reading a biblical text is an active process of selecting, judging, combining, juxtaposing, and offering interpretations for consideration in the wider community of reading.

To conceive of biblical interpretation as an active and constructive process requires the perspective that the meaning of the text is not identical with what it meant in its original context, even if such meaning could be determined. The meaning of the text does not inhere in it, await discovery and identification by the preacher or expert commentator, and then demand passive acceptance by those who submit to the authority

3. Sylvia Keesmaat, "Colossians," in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, ed. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David Sánchez (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004).

4. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies," in *Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 117–33.

of the text. Rather, the engaged feminist reader makes the imaginative effort to see the text within its historical and social context as part of the vibrant mix of debate and discussion of the ecclesia. Women readers apply persistent and courageous effort to read as subjects and to envision the community that values Colossians as a prophetic or edifying word. The community does not just "include" them as exceptions but is defined by their presence and leadership.

Urgent social and political issues shape the context for reading Colossians today. Violence, widespread hunger, environmental degradation, economic inequity, and racial and ethnic conflict mean that reading Colossians from a feminist perspective is an ethical and theological practice. We make interpretive choices that privilege democracy over tyranny, equality over subordination, and affirmation of the earth and the human body above anti-materialist perspectives. We seek and develop metaphors and language for salvation, Christ, and the church that may be fruitful resources for strengthening human community and resisting forces of oppression.

Method and Approach: Historical, Ideological, and Theopoetic

In order to engage Paul's letter to the Colossians both critically and constructively and to make visible rather than to hide the ethical and theological commitments that guide our reading, we chose a combination of methods that address important questions of feminist interpretation and meaning-making and that come out of our respective training and expertise as scholars and readers. We take into account historical reconstruction and propose to narrate different possible stories that lie "behind" the letter. We analyze and critique the symbolic structure of the powerful metaphors that make up the exhortation and affirmation of the letter, asking questions about what the metaphors make visible and what they obscure.[5] Then we take an additional step, drawing on a perspective from outside the conventional realm of biblical studies: that of theopoetics.

In our conversations as feminist scholars and sisters in communities of Christian faith, we, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge and Claire Miller Colombo, have read Colossians together from our different academic perspectives.

5. Kittredge, "Feminist Approaches," 125–27.

Kittredge comes to Colossians from the discipline of feminist rhetorical biblical scholarship. While teaching and reading Scripture in seminary and parish communities, Kittredge explores practices for engaging early Christian literature that spring from that model. Introduced to theopoetics through a seminar with Colombo, Kittredge was drawn to it as a way to integrate imagination with scriptural reading. Colombo comes to Colossians—and theology more broadly—from the world of literary studies. Her work with the Romantic poets and the Christian contemplative tradition has shaped her understanding of language as an invitation into mystery rather than a resolution of it. In a New Testament seminar taught by Kittredge, Colombo discovered a way of reading Scripture that is consistent with this understanding. Inspired by the challenge of the Wisdom Commentary series to do constructive theological work, we decided to read Colossians together from our different backgrounds and temperaments. We were pleased to be joined by Annie Tinsley, the author of *Postcolonial African American Re-reading of Colossians: Identity, Reception, and Interpretation under the Gaze of Empire.* Her contribution, "Separation,"[6] speaks of the history of the reception of Colossians and its impact on the lives of enslaved families.

Working together, we became intrigued by the potential of feminist historical biblical scholarship in dialogue with theopoetic theological perspectives—those that admit poetic, imaginative ways of understanding and speaking about God—to offer readers new ways to engage the biblical text. We engage in an experiment or demonstration of how these perspectives work together. Feminist historical-critical scholarship performs the work of deconstructing and destabilizing received kyriarchalized readings of Scripture. It pries open a space (χώρα) into and from which new meaning can flow. A theopoetic reading can then exercise itself within this space, generating new, life-giving possibilities about a text for all readers. For example, it might reimagine and narrate the world behind the text with the assumption of women's presence and leadership, agency and voice; it might wonder how the words and images of the text were originally received; it might tease out new metaphorical understandings of those words and images from a contemporary perspective. In these and other ways, theopoetic encounters with Scripture extend the imaginative work—the reconstruction and revisioning—that

6. See this volume, pages 190–91.

must follow the deconstructive gesture of feminist historical commentary in order for that commentary to bear fruit in the world today.[7]

Although theopoetic methods and sensitivities vary, those who work from this perspective tend to emphasize the emergent quality of God-in-the-world in an ongoing, ever-unfolding but never predictable pattern. As a cousin of process thought, theopoetics resists oppressive systematic theologies rooted in the logic of substance, exclusion, omnipotence, and noncontradiction, suggesting instead that every utterance about God is "always already unsaying itself."[8] It affirms and attends to subjective experiences of God—both individual and communal—and invites articulations of those experiences in language and other forms. It encourages a poetic sensibility within theological and hermeneutical discourse, an awareness that truth and beauty are mutually inherent, and a radical openness to the in-breaking of the transcendent in the particular. It insists that both God and Scripture are and will always be open to interpretation, and, by the same token, it resists closed proclamations about the nature of God or the meaning of God's word. At the same time, it appreciates the depth and richness of inherited language and receives in a spirit of gratitude the experiences and expressions of our Christian ancestors.[9]

A theopoetic perspective is appropriate to a feminist reading of Colossians—or any scriptural text—because it is holistic, tending closely to elements of a text that reflect a diversity of perspectives but holding them, at the same time, in solution, as mutually implicated parts of a whole. This perspective is especially appropriate within the context of a feminist reading of texts that emerged during the first decades of Christian organization and expression, as those closest in time to the event of Christ absorbed and interpreted the force of his life, death, and resurrection in a multitude of ways. A feminist-theopoetic reading of Colossians

7. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza has similarly insisted that "we need not only methods of deconstruction but methods of re-construction and re-visioning for de-kyriarchalizing the imagination, de-imperializing scripture, and de-colonizing the Divine." Schüssler-Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 29.

8. Catherine Keller, "Theopoetics and the Pluri-verse," in *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 187. For a broad survey of the theopoetics movement and its various strains of thought and practice, see L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

9. L. Callid Keefe-Perry, "Toward the Heraldic: A Theopoetic Response to Monorthodoxy," in Caputo, *Theopoetic Folds*, 187.

and other Pauline literature reminds readers of the rudimentary and experimental nature of the early Christian vocabulary and celebrates rather than justifies or resolves the tensions inherent in it.

A theopoetic perspective is also appropriate to a feminist reading of early Christian writings because of a shared epistemology between the two discourses. Both tend to understand knowledge—of ourselves, our communities, our world, and the divine—as arising out of lived, embodied experience. Both question earlier, inherited understandings of knowledge as a predominantly rational engagement with the world (and, by extension, a text) and encourage imaginative, creative, and affective responses to what we live, hear, and read.[10] Both locate, in particular, in embodied human experience the origins of those very ideas that would later become the elevated and disembodied doctrines of the church. Both affirm that the vitality of the church lay in the ability of all its members to participate in the ongoing making of Christian meaning in a global, multireligious, and multicultural context.

Finally, a theopoetic perspective is appropriate to a feminist reading of Colossians because it understands authorship as a construct and refuses to privilege "authorial intent" over readerly understanding of a text.[11] In this view, meaning is neither delimited nor predetermined by an author or an expert. Instead, meaning proliferates in a field of resonances between the words of the text, the context in which it was written, and the experience and context of readers themselves. A theopoetic reading of a text invites and expects such play. Furthermore, it trusts that the field of play from which meanings emerge is itself the cosmo-Christic matrix through which all things exist and in which they hold together (Col 1:16-17).

Unlike historical-critical biblical studies, a theopoetic reading of a biblical text is less methodological than it is contemplative. While historical criticism analyzes and seeks to explain the text, a theopoetic reading reckons first with what is present in a work—rather than what might have been there or what may be behind what is there—and puts itself before the material in a state of openness and hospitality, trusting that such a posture better enables readers to hear a text's original voices and entertain new possibilities and interpretations. It then steps into the space opened by historical-critical analysis and wonders about a text's

10. See, for example, Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 19–65.

11. David L. Miller, "Theopoetry or Theopoetics?" *CrossCurrents* 60 (March 2010): 11.

origins, imagines the people or communities involved, and cultivates a spiritual kinship with those people and groups. The value of such a reading is not explanatory but unifying. As we read theopoetically, we experience membership in an infinitely diverse but mystically unified communion of saints, trusting that a dynamic engagement with Scripture is one doorway into such communion.

Although feminist readings of Scripture often reject a contemplative or receptive approach because it can appear passive, a theopoetic reading insists that a contemplative approach is the appropriate starting point for any encounter with Scripture because the insights that arise from such an encounter may open paths of understanding and action through which we can most effectively strengthen human community and resist forces of oppression. With Catherine Keller, therefore, we agree that calls within mystical Christianity "to be quiet, to listen, to meditate, or to pay attention are not orders of silence or censorship."[12] We hold that social, ecclesial, and scholarly action that springs from contemplative practice is more just, more compassionate, and more redolent of God.

Finally, a theopoetic reading of Scripture values consonance and dissonance alike. While it delights in correspondences between passages, images, and texts, it also appreciates ruptures, contradictions, and ironies, insofar as these features replicate and affirm our perception and experience of things in themselves—within a single human mind, within a family, within a community, on our planet, and within the cosmos as we understand it. Some things rhyme and chime; others clash and clang. When a text does so too, reality is recognized there. Deep calls to and responds to deep. We wish to cultivate a sense of the depth of scriptural texts and of our own ability to read and respond to them.

Interpretive Choices: The Participation of Women and the Centrality of Baptism

We assume the presence and agency of women in the community in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Women sing the Christ hymn, participate in angelic worship, observe ascetic practices, speak with salt, and read letters in communal worship. We read against the rhetorical grain of the text and reconstruct women as active agents in the Christological

12. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 19.

and theological formation that happens in these early decades of the missionary movement.

We place baptism at the center of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in order to read Colossians as a whole. Baptism constituted a ritual participation in the story of Jesus' passion, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. God's vindication of Jesus of Nazareth, faithful up to and throughout his execution by the Roman authorities, demonstrated God's righteousness. In the activity of the Spirit and the prophecy within the body after Easter, Jesus' friends saw the βασιλεία ("reign of God") coming into being and the age of the Messiah dawn. In baptism, the faithful were reclothed in new garments, freed from the power of sin around them and within them, and enacted the equality of children of God in which they were one, "no more Jew or Greek, . . . slave or free, . . . male and female" (Gal 3:28; also Col 3:11). Baptism into Christ, available to all, and its creation of a new people, is the center of our inquiry into and exploration of Colossians. This focus flows from the letter itself, which alludes to the believers' experience of baptism and the church's traditions and metaphors (including those of rescue and transfer, reconciliation, peacemaking, circumcision, and reclothing). Such a focus also resists the rhetoric of the letter that stresses the person of Paul as the source of the authority of the instructions and the tradition that interprets the meaning of the letter completely in terms of what Paul said, what Paul thought, and whom Paul opposes. We see Paul and his coworkers in light of the Gospel, God's powerful intervention in the forces of the world.

Liturgical practice shapes Colossians through the incorporation of prayer formulae, hymns, doxologies, and other elements of ancient worship. The exhortation in Col 3:15-17 evokes a picture of communal worship shaped by singing and giving thanks. We focus attention on the communal experience of baptism and away from the single authoritative voice of the author so that readers will reconstruct and reimagine the most significant authority to be the Spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus working through the people.

Colossians as Witness to a Conversation

Paul's letters and those written in his name in the New Testament canon show the process of argument over how baptism into Christ's death and resurrection was concretely lived out in the ecclesia. In the letters, we see the tension between those positions that understood baptism to radically reorganize communities along lines utterly alternate to the

Greco-Roman society and those that believed the body of Christ should reflect the Greco-Roman hierarchical order. We see ambiguity among the letters of Paul as well as in those in the Pauline tradition, and we see tension within individual letters themselves about the relationships between Jew and Gentile, slave and master, and male and female. The letter to the Colossians shows the author and the community grappling with debates over practice, the role of Christ, the structure of the community, and proper conduct. Rather than reading the exhortations in the letter as commandments—for example, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters" (Col 3:22)—we investigate the letter as a conversation or a laboratory for Christological and ecclesiological formulation. We inquire into the logic of the author's theological arguments, imagine different historical reconstructions of the situation that provokes the letter, and participate in that ongoing interpretive conversation. Through these interpretive activities, we ask readers to remember that a letter is an incomplete trace of a larger and less contained exchange of ideas and to bear this in mind as they reflect upon and dialogue with the text.

It is especially in our vision of ongoing interpretive conversation that theopoetics comes into play. Because theopoetics is concerned with lived, embodied experiences and expressions of the divine, a theopoetic reading of Colossians encourages contemporary conversation among Christian women and men in the spirit of the conversations we see happening in the text itself. This conversation might be interior and personal or public and communal; in either case, it will concern itself with this question, which is also the central question of the letter: What practices and images best help Christian individuals and communities in a given time and place live out our baptismal nature as members of Christ's body?

The Letter to the Colossians: Author, Date, Place of Composition, Historical Situation, Audience, and Purpose

The letter to the Colossians is the earliest of the letters that, in the name of Paul, develop the language and theology of Paul's letters to address controversies, to encourage churches, and to interpret Paul's teaching for pastoral situations in the years after his death. Written pseudonymously by a follower of Paul as an act of honor for an esteemed teacher and intended to extend his influence, Colossians employs the evangelical instrument of a letter of Paul as a means of moral exhortation to particular behavior and practice based on beliefs about God and Christ. Its precise date and place of composition are unknown, but if written shortly after

Paul's death, a probable date might be 62–64 CE. Although addressed to the faithful in the city of Colossae in the Lycus Valley (in modern-day Turkey), the audience is spoken of along with those in Laodicea and Heirapolis (Col 4:13, 16), and the letter is to be read to those in Laodicea. The setting of imprisonment (4:3, 10, 18) is important to the presentation of the author and his reliability, but determination of the location of the writing, whether in Ephesus, Caesarea, or Rome (where Paul was known to be imprisoned), or elsewhere, is not possible.

Authorship and Authority

Issues of the historical situation, audience, and purpose of the letter are closely bound up with questions about authorship. Our judgment that the letter is pseudonymous has implications for our interpretation of the rhetorical situation described in the letter and for the various possible imaginative reconstructions. Because of the centrality of the issue of authorship, we address its complexity here.

That Paul, along with "Timothy our brother" (Col 1:1), is the author of Colossians is of great import within the letter; the author stresses at length and in detail his own status as an apostle in 1:23–2:4 in opposition to the rival teachers. The commendations at the letter's closing to individuals named in other Pauline correspondence contribute to the portrayal of the author, who is linked with many well-known emissaries to the churches. The claim that the apostle Paul is the author is essential to the way Colossians functions.

At the same time that the claim of Pauline authorship is essential to Colossians, the historical question of whether Colossians is written by Paul or a disciple preoccupies New Testament scholarship. Both historical and theological issues are at stake in this debate. Historical critics distinguish between those letters of Paul that were authored by him (Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon) and those probably not authored by him: the "deutero-Pauline" letters (Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians) and the "Pastoral Epistles" (1–2 Timothy and Titus). Of all the letters considered to be pseudonymous, Colossians is the closest to Paul's own letters, considered by James D. G. Dunn as a "bridge document" connecting Paul's letters with the earliest movement of pseudonymous authorship.[13] Protestant scholarship has

13. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 40.

tended to value the earliest letters of Paul most highly and has been critical of the theological developments of the deutero-Pauline tradition. So for some critics, attributing Colossians to Paul himself increases its esteem. For others who resist the teaching about submission, attributing Colossians to a later author serves to disassociate it from Paul, protecting Paul's reputation as the apostle of freedom and placing the submission teaching into a more doubtful and contingent category. Feminist inquiry seeks to escape the dynamic that seeks to make Paul's theology consistent and unified and to identify with Paul's theological position.[14] To do so is difficult because it requires reading against the rhetorical grain of the text and resisting the momentum of most commentary.

Feminist interpretation of Paul's letters moves away from a sole focus on the author to pay closer attention to the community. As a key moment in the ongoing contestation about belief and practice in the early churches, Colossians gives insight into the variety of consistent and colliding christologies and the different conclusions believers drew about the effects of the Gospel. Rather than attribute all creativity to the author, we treat those with whom Paul and his partners have worked and worshiped in the past and those who received the letter as believers who have contributed to its theology and metaphors. They are a congregation of agents, active women and men who read and interpret Scripture, enact the story of death and resurrection in baptism and the Eucharist, and encounter Christ through visionary and ecstatic experience. Reading letters in worship and hearing the preaching of teachers, whether Paul, Epaphras, Timothy, Junia, Phoebe, or Nympha, are significant but not the only sources of their faith.

Genre and Structure of Colossians: An Exhortatory Letter

Colossians follows the ancient letter form as adapted by Paul, opening with the identification of senders and recipients, a greeting, and an elaborated thanksgiving. The letter body begins with Col 1:24, continues in 2:6–3:4 with exhortation about the false teaching, and offers general exhortation in 3:5–4:6. The body concludes with the statement of the intention to send emissaries, Tychicus and Onesimus. The final closing includes greetings, exhortations, a statement about Paul's writing, and grace.

14. Schüssler Fiorenza describes the "drive to coherence and identity" in *The Power of the Word*, 86.

The ancient genre of Colossians is that of a paraenetic letter, or a letter of exhortation. Colossians attempts to persuade its recipients to take certain actions in the future based on shared values and beliefs. It most closely resembles the letters of ancient philosophical schools whose teachers would advise their students to follow a particular way of life.[15] The author's summary exhortation is expressed in Col 2:6: "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." Here the author equates the congregation's experience of Christ ("received Christ Jesus [as] the Lord") with their ongoing relationship with him, and the continuity of their faith with what they have been taught. The author makes the logic of his exhortation persuasive with a variety of arguments and narratives. He cites his relationship with the community, particularly through mediating teachers and ministers and through his suffering, as well as authoritative theological traditions like the Christ hymn, and arresting and dramatic references to the experience of salvation through baptism and its morally transforming effects.

The author incorporates traditional material, theological/liturgical narratives that are recognized by and shared with those who hear the letter. Allusions to baptism are significant throughout the letter. Two other elements that have been identified as sources are the Christ hymn of Col 1:15-20 and the table of instructions to members of the household in 3:18–4:2.

Sources and Composition

Authors of New Testament letters typically quote, incorporate, or allude to traditions in circulation in the worship and teaching of the ecclesia. One function of citing these traditions is for the author to build a relationship with the congregation by developing language or images that are used in their common life. In Colossians, the most significant of these traditions is the "Christ hymn" in Col 1:15-20 that proclaims Christ's supremacy, omnipresence, and sovereignty. Feminist approaches to Paul have highly valued these traditions and have seen them as a window

15. Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Spiritual Wisdom of Colossians in the Context of Greco-Roman Spiritualities," in *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually,* ed. Andrew T. Lincoln, Gordon McConville, and Lloyd K. Pietersen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 213–14.

into the theology of the community. By conceiving them as produced and owned as songs in corporate worship, feminist scholars have expanded the notion of authorship and made it possible to imagine the speech and voice of women.[16] The author of Colossians borrowed the hymn in Col 1:15-20, adapted it, and employed it to make the argument powerful and persuasive.

Another significant "source" or tradition in Colossians is the section of instructions to members of the household in Col 3:18–4:1. These instructions appear to follow a conventional pattern and have parallels in Jewish Hellenistic literature. Referred to in New Testament scholarship as the "household code," this teaching is problematic for those who read the letter with a feminist perspective. Historical-critical scholarship has been able to isolate this text and others (Eph 5:22–6:9; 1 Tim 2:9-15; Titus 2:2-10; 1 Pet 2:13–3:7) by identifying their conventional character. To name these instructions as "conventional" serves to dislodge them from their status as authoritative Pauline teaching. The letter to the Colossians calls on both the hymn and this table of duties, however, and harnesses them for its rhetorical purpose. A major challenge for interpretation of Colossians is to understand the relationship between these elements of the letter.

The letters of Paul are an important influence on Colossians, if not actually a source. Passages in Colossians draw on imagery from Paul's undisputed letters and take it in different directions. The interrelationship between Colossians and other Pauline letters displays part of the theological conversation of early Christian communities.

The Relationship of Colossians and Ephesians

The letter to the Ephesians overlaps substantially with Colossians, and the consensus is that the author of Ephesians used Colossians as a source. The presence of both Colossians and Ephesians in the New Testament canon demonstrates the authority that Paul's name and the letter form had acquired by the time the New Testament writings were collected and canonized. Ephesians shows how one disciple of Paul interpreted and rewrote the inherited letters, omitting parts, elaborating on others, and borrowing the authority of Paul's name and language. While some

16. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Rethinking Authorship in the Letters of Paul," in *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,* ed. Shelly Matthews, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and Melanie Johnson Debaufre (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 318–33.

read Colossians through the lens of Ephesians, using Ephesians' elaboration of Colossians as a cue to Colossians' meaning, we read Colossians on its own terms because we recognize that Ephesians' development of Colossians' imagery reflects Ephesians' own concerns.

Rhetorical and Historical Situation of Colossians

Within the rhetoric of Colossians, the author's exhortation to live in Christ is set in contrast to a threat of erroneous teaching, warned against in a series of prohibitions in Col 2:8-23. "Christ" or "according to Christ" (2:8, 17, 20; 3:1) is the criterion that makes the philosophy, judgments, and regulations ineffective and unnecessary. The Christ hymn and its reprise in 2:9 are the main theological warrant for the author's argument.

Moving from the rhetorical situation described by the author to the historical situation for Colossians has been challenging for New Testament scholars. The Lycus Valley suffered an earthquake in the seventh year of Nero's reign (60–61 CE, Tacitus, Annals 14.27). The city of Colossae has never been excavated. Evidence about Colossae from historical sources (Herodotus, Xenophon, Pliny, Strabo) is not definitive in understanding the letter. More important, the specific character of the teaching alluded to in the warnings is not absolutely clear. The quotations "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (Col 2:22) appear to refer to ascetic practices, but they remain vague. Although elements of the practices warned against are common to scholarly reconstructions of Jewish practice, Stoicism, mystery religions, and Gnosticism, no known position in the first century lines up with all the elements mentioned in the polemic.

Historical reconstruction depends on reading the cues in the letter itself. Historical reconstructions must make sense of the Christ hymn, the household code, and the teaching opposed by the author, the "philosophy" (Col 2:8). Most see the hymn being called upon to counter the philosophy. The code may be read as a response to behavior instigated by the "philosophy" and those who participate in its practices. Our proposed reconstructions and their theological evaluation take gender into account. The reconstruction assumes women were participating in the practices and worship that the author depicts as erroneous, in the idealized worship of singing and thanksgiving and in the expression of faith proclaimed in the Christ hymn. We resist the dynamic of "othering" that is a feature of much historical work on Paul's letters.

Metaphors for Christ and Salvation in Colossians

Colossians is characterized by striking metaphors for the transformation effected by baptism in Christ's death and resurrection and for Christ himself. These metaphors are developed from images and narratives in Scripture, from analogies with social life, and from the language of early Christian creed and worship. The relationship of the faithful with Christ is described both as an organic unity in which Christ permeates all things and as a relationship of submission as in a subject to a ruler. Some metaphors imply that the interaction of people in community is mutual and interdependent and others that it is hierarchical. These metaphors are forged in the political context of the Roman Empire, a political system in which rulers dominate the ruled, and the proper order of the household reflects the proper order of the state.

Some recent interpreters of Colossians, concerned to read the letter in the context of ancient imperial language and committed to finding in Colossians contemporary resources for understanding the church as a community that resists imperial values, have argued that Colossians' metaphors of "making peace through the blood of the cross" (Col 1:20), "disarming the rulers and authorities" (2:15), and the universal Lordship of Christ function as anti-imperial language.[17] We argue, however, that the metaphors of Colossians reflect the conversation and debate of the early church. We observe that the author resists imperial domination when speaking of the defeat of the powers by Christ and yet reinforces it when counseling wives and slaves to obedience. It is our aim through our interpretive choices to display this tension, to reflect on it, and to encourage and amplify the metaphors that envision a discipleship of equals. Adopting the phrase of Nelle Merton, we will "hear the ecclesia into speech."[18]

Both as feminist commentators who attend to language as a historical record and as theopoetic commentators who see meaning-making as an ongoing endeavor, we foreground the language of Colossians as metaphorical. We remain attuned not only to the metaphors in the text but also to the function of metaphor itself. As Sallie McFague has shown, metaphors are particularly suited to the description of new and alter-

17. Sylvia Keesmaat, "Colossians," 560–61, and Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed,* 63–64. See also Harry O. Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," *JSNT* 27 (March 2005): 323–49.

18. Nelle Merton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 55.

native realities because they begin with what is known and reach into the unknown through comparison.[19] Early Christians therefore use a range of metaphors as they struggle to express their experiences of the risen Christ and to articulate who they are as a community. We remain sensitive to this struggle and to metaphor-making as an experimental and pioneering act, a reaching toward truth rather than a perfect representation of it.[20]

With this understanding in mind, we note the tension between Colossians' metaphors (for example, between those that cast communal life in egalitarian terms and those that reinforce the existing hierarchical social norms) but allow them to remain in tension rather than seek resolution. We resist attempts to explain rhetorical or metaphorical contradictions and ambiguities, choosing instead to read the letter as an inscription of human grappling toward knowledge of God in Christ and reconciliation in the Spirit and as the partial record of a larger, plurivocal conversation about "right" practice and belief. Such a reading finds beauty in the gaps, tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities themselves because they inscribe and echo our own experiences of being Christian in the world. Following the letter's central Christological claim, we suggest that the entire letter to the Colossians functions metaphorically as a disjointed body in which "all things hold together" (Col 1:17)—not through logical consistency, but precisely through rhetorical and metaphorical diversity. Further, we understand this diversity not as a problem to be solved but as a blueprint for an organic, participatory, theologically open-ended Christian discourse that remains aware of its metaphorical nature.

As noted above, the very existence of the letter to the Colossians gives evidence of argument and debate surrounding the formulation of language about Christ, salvation, and the church—that is to say, the formulation of Christian self-understanding. To formulate is to give form to the as-yet formless, to grope toward the unknown via the known. In Colossians, this groping process begins with two competing "knowns"—the human, resurrected body of Jesus and the social, hierarchical body of the empire—and moves toward a self-understanding of Christian ecclesia as a body. What kind of body, the letter asks, are we?

19. Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975), 43–65; and *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 1–65.

20. Keefe-Perry, "Toward the Heraldic," 145.

This discussion poses the same question. It also affirms that questioning itself, along with the imaginative effort it requires, is a central function of the body of Christ.[21]

21. According to Roland Faber, the theopoetic impulse "seek[s] to roughen up unified appearances by differentiating the various deep-lying, multiple voices hidden under various powerful contenders of an alleged 'orthodoxy' of content, method, and direction of thought" (*God as Poet of the World: Exploring Process Theologies*, trans. Douglas W. Stott [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox], 318). L. Callid Keefe-Perry echoes Faber in his proposal of a heraldic rather than doctrinal model of seeking and saying the truth: "The Herald does not just share her story," he writes, "but invites others to share theirs, raising questions to any monophonic theology that suggests a wholly accurate, complete, and closed interpretation of revelation and the Divine" ("Toward the Heraldic," 147).

Colossians 1:1–2:5

Greetings, Prayers, and Paul

Greetings (1:1-2)

As in other letters by Paul, Colossians begins by naming the authors, addressing the recipients, and greeting them with the words "grace . . . and peace" (Col 1:2). That Paul is "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (1:1) signals his credentials and the authorization for the communication that will follow. He writes with "Timothy our brother" (1:1). Paul praises his associate, Timothy, in Phil 2:19-20, and Luke describes him in Acts 16:1-5. In the development of the canonical Pauline tradition, Timothy, Paul's "child," is the recipient of Paul's pastoral instruction in 1 and 2 Timothy. Some scholars theorize that Timothy may be the secretary for Paul or even the author of the letter.[1] The designation "brother," used also to refer to Tychicus (Col 4:7) and Onesimus (4:9), indicates the vision of the leaders of the community, as well as its members, as siblings within a family. To describe the community as the holy "saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae" (1:2; the NRSV translates the adjective ἁγίοις, "the holy ones,"

1. For discussion see James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 35–39.

Colossians 1:1-2

[1]Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
[2]To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

as "saints") highlights their identity as the people of God (Exod 19:6; Lev 11:44), called to be holy and faithful to the God who called them.

As the church became more organized and as the New Testament canon was coming into being, male leadership became the norm, and female leadership was circumscribed or prohibited. The references to "brothers" for Paul's male associates came to be read as a designation of office or leadership role. The rhetoric of Colossians, as an androcentric text, assumes males as the norm and projects females as objects of instructions or as exceptions. Contemporary readers, shaped by the tradition of reading the text as addressed to and about men, may unconsciously imagine the congregation as men. The translation of ἀδελφοί as "brothers" or "brethren" reinforces this picture. Commentary that refers to "brothers [and sisters]"[2] reiterates it. A feminist perspective resists this tradition of interpretation and reading practices in order to reconstruct the churches in the Lycus Valley, Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea as being communities of women and men.[3] The correct English translation of ἀδελφοί is "brothers and sisters," because in Greek, the grammatical masculine plural is used for groups of males and females. Likewise the adjective "holy" or the noun "saints" does not mean "holy men" but "holy women and men." The greeting to Nympha and to the church in her house (Col 4:15) is evidence that women were leaders and contributors in these communities. The Christian terms "holy ones" and "faithful ones" refer to God's calling into being a holy nation and a holy people. This holistic and egalitarian understanding of the community in Colossae and its neighboring cities is the starting point for the analysis of the letter.

The relationship of this people is grounded in the saving work of Jesus Christ and in the community of his body; they are the holy and faith-

2. For example, Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary,* NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 28.

3. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies," in *Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 120–25.

ful ones "in Christ" (Col 1:2). The meaning of this prepositional phrase will be illustrated and supplemented by the variety of metaphors in Colossians.

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Blessing (1:3-14)

In one long sentence in Col 1:3-8, the author gives thanks to God for the faith and love of the addressees and rehearses their history with the Gospel that they learned from Epaphras and that is flourishing among them and throughout the world. Naming the qualities of the congregation for which the author is thankful and elaborating on the strong ties between himself and Epaphras ("beloved fellow servant," "faithful minister of Christ" [1:7]) and between themselves and Epaphras, the author builds credibility with the audience and establishes and strengthens the relationship on which the exhortations in the letter will be made. The thanksgiving is made in the context of prayer, beginning with the phrase "in our prayers for you" in 1:3 and continuing with the assertion that we have "not ceased praying for you" in 1:9. The indirect reference to what is being prayed about in the thanksgiving is supplemented by a direct blessing formula: "May you be made strong . . . may you be prepared" (1:11). The prayer reappears in the letter's closing when devotion to prayer is urged (4:2), and Epaphras is described as praying on their behalf (4:12). Prayer is a noncoercive and mutual practice that maintains relationship in a situation of distance or absence. Prayer, along with forbearance, forgiveness, and love (3:12-14), is one of the practices of a community of holiness of being "in Christ."

The particular features of the thanksgiving give clues about the situation to which the letter is addressed, the beliefs and practices of the community, and the conflict that lies behind the letter. The praise for the congregation and the petitions of the prayers convey the author's belief that the recipients have every reason to be confident and secure in their faith and practice. The reminder that they hear of the gospel from a trustworthy teacher reaffirms the sufficiency of their behavior. All of these elements of the thanksgiving can be read as preparation for the author's refutation of "philosophy and empty deceit" in Col 2:8-23. For example, prayer for "spiritual wisdom and understanding" (1:9) anticipates that "wisdom" is in dispute. The prayer "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power" (1:11) anticipates the concern with "rulers and authorities" (2:15) and "elemental spirits of the universe" (2:20) in the description of the philosophy. The author stresses

Colossians 1:3-14

3In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 4for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel 6that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. 7This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, 8and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

9For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. 11May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully 12giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. 13He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

the virtues and beliefs that the community already possesses as well as the successful career of the good news in their midst.

The prayer "you may live lives worthy of the Lord" (Col 1:10) prepares the reader for the exhortation to "continue to live your lives in him" (2:6), the summary exhortation of the letter. Translated in the NRSV as "live your lives," the word is literally to "walk" (περιπατέω). "Walking" is commonly used in Jewish writings to describe living (Exod 18:20; Deut 13:4-5) and is used elsewhere in Paul's letters (e.g., Rom 6:4; 8:4; 13:13; 14:14). The subject of the discussion that is audible in the rhetoric of Colossians is *how* to "walk in Christ." The thanksgiving culminates in the liturgical acclamation of the effects of baptism and the gifts of salvation: "giving thanks to the Father who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (1:12). In 1:13, the address shifts from the second-person "you" to the first-person plural "we" to emphasize the experience of salvation shared by the author and those to whom the author writes. Referencing the baptism of the faithful, the author asserts in vivid terms the finality of the rescue from danger and transport/transfer into another kingdom.

Images in this thanksgiving and prayer reflect different narratives and metaphors that the early Christian missionary movement used to understand the transformation effected by Jesus' death and resurrection. The author alludes to and calls on liturgical traditions and metaphorical language about salvation and the church to illuminate the exhortation to "walk in him" (Col 2:6). The language has its origins in reflection on the narratives of Scripture in light of the community's experience of Jesus Christ.

To "bear fruit" (Col 1:10) is an organic image that describes what the gospel does, to produce and expand, in the world and "among yourselves" (1:6) and "in every good work" (1:10), echoing the Hebrew prophets who called on Israel to bear fruit of justice and peace (Isa 5:1-7; 37:30; 2 Kgs 19:30; Hos 9:10-17). Bearing fruit is the way that Israel fulfills its calling to be a light to the nations. Christian literature speaks of good works as "fruit" (e.g., Matt 7:17-19; Rom 7:4-5). Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat argue that Paul's use of the image of fruit bearing operates as a hidden critique of the imperial propaganda about the abundance and fruit bearing of the empire. In Colossians, fruitfulness evokes fertility and life that issue from faithfulness.[4] Walsh and Keesmaat's work shows how the metaphor of fruit bearing offers an organic, agricultural metaphor that can be developed as a resource for contemporary people of faith.

The striking image in the first-person-plural declaration that he has "rescued" and "transferred" us into "the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1:13) alludes to traditions about baptism. The military language of conflict with a powerful enemy and of deliverance is drawn from the story of Israel's deliverance by God in the exodus. The imagery of early Christian writings relies on images of armed battle that are significant in the Hebrew Bible and that come to be elaborated in apocalyptic writings of Second Temple Judaism.[5] The apocalyptic vision of a world dominated by successive rulers that undergoes a decisive "regime change" through the death and resurrection of Jesus constitutes the symbolic universe of the early Christian imagination. Deliverance in Christ is a type of exodus.

When they are adopted in Paul's letters, the exodus traditions of deliverance and defeat of enemies retain their dramatic, oppositional, and

4. Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 71–76.

5. See, for example, George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 69–75.

violent character. For example, in Rom 6:1-14, baptism effects a radical change from death to life: a regime change from the rule of sin to the rule of righteousness.[6] Here, in Colossians, the regime change is expressed in spatial terms, as a moving across, a carrying across from one realm, "the power of darkness," to another realm, "the kingdom of his beloved Son" (literally, the "Son of his love"; see Col 1:13). The expression "kingdom of his beloved Son" does not appear elsewhere in the New Testament. The opening verses of Colossians have used the term "the Father" for God, and the reference to "giving thanks to the Father" in the previous phrase gives sense to this unusual phrase "kingdom of his beloved Son." While father language for God is frequent in the opening verses, it is absent from the hymn in Col 1:18-20.

The motif of rescue and transfer is supplemented by a relative phrase "in whom" and followed by two other metaphors for salvation: "redemption" and "forgiveness of sins." The metaphor of redemption is used to describe the effect of Jesus' death (Rom 3:21; 8:23; 1 Cor 1:30; see also Mark 10:45). It works by analogy with the buying back of slaves to freedom through the paying of ransom. Redemption evoked the dramatic transformation from the bondage and alienation of slavery to the liberation of freedom. "Forgiveness of sins" is important in Colossians. In 2:13, forgiveness of sins is a result of Christ's death and of baptism. In 3:13, mutual forgiveness is a feature of the ideal faithful community. In letters by Paul himself, "forgiveness of sins" does not occur, but rather "sin" is described as an enslaving power that is defeated by grace/faith (Rom 6:12-14). By referring to the "forgiveness of sins" here, the author of Colossians shifts the image from sin as personified power toward an emphasis on forgiving of the believers' transgressions. Jerry L. Sumney argues that forgiveness of sin is so important in Colossians because the rival teachers claim that sins are not forgiven without practicing what they recommend. Christ makes possible forgiveness of sins and reconciliation.[7]

These metaphors that grow out of the exodus traditions and the different ways that they are employed in the New Testament literature raise complex issues for feminist theological reflection. The radical reversal of power and the overthrow of unjust rulers in the prophetic tradition, exemplified by the song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55, offer the Christian feminist imagination a vision of establishing justice and righteousness. The

6. A. Kathleen Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative of God's Righteousness* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 79.

7. Sumney, *Colossians*, 91.

decisive defeat of tyrants, sin and death, is powerful for women who are enslaved by them (Rom 6:1-23). With Christ as Lord, Christian women knew themselves free from other masters. For the author of Colossians, however, Christ as Lord precisely did not mean freedom from other lords, either for wives or for slaves (Col 3:18). When "ruling," "submitting," and "being ruled" become the predominant images for the community of the people of God, they can eclipse democratic images articulated in language of siblings, partnership, friendship, and people of God. In Colossians, these early Christian metaphors of father, lord, powers, and rulers are used to argue against the rival philosophy.

Theopoetic Reflection: Opening Closure

Our theopoetic reading of the thanksgiving and prayer focuses on the tension between the major metaphor groups in the letter's opening. We note that fruit-bearing is the dominant metaphor in Col 1:3-10 and that it gives way in 1:11-14 to metaphors of power, inheritance, rescue/transfer, redemption, and forgiveness. The tension between these metaphor groups is both gendered and organizational. Fruit bearing is a feminine and an agricultural metaphor, while the metaphors of inheritance, rescue/transfer, and the redemption or forgiveness of debts are masculine and political-economical. Organizationally, fruit-bearing is organic; that which bears fruit takes in natural materials, metabolizes and transforms those elements, and from them, out of its own flesh, brings forth new life. Inheriting, rescuing, redeeming, and forgiving, on the other hand, are human interactions that require or effect a change of status in at least one of the parties involved. They are embedded within and help determine social hierarchies. Both metaphor types—the organic and the hierarchical—are invoked throughout the letter, in the Christ hymn, which follows immediately, and in later exhortatory sections of the letter. The tension between them creates and sustains the structure of the entire work.

The author moves from the first metaphor set ("may you lead lives worthy of the Lord . . . as you bear fruit in every good work"; Col 1:10) to the second ("May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power"; Col 1:11) within a triad of petitions, the third of which introduces the theme of submission that will be elaborated and specified in the household code: "may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance" (1:11). The association of

endurance with joyful gratitude and inclusion among the saints establishes a logical foundation for the author's later claim that some forms of submission and endurance are necessary to the Christian way.

While noting the tension between these metaphor groups, however, we also notice certain resonances between them. Both fruit bearing and inheritance/rescue/redemption are earthy, fleshy enterprises. They are creaturely ways of being, progressing, surviving, gifting, and thriving within native systems. Neither is immune to mutation or error. Both take place "on the ground" in arenas of great importance to first-century Mediterranean ways of life. Although fruit bearing is used metaphorically by the author to describe the work of baptized humans, and the political-economic metaphors are used to describe the work of Christ, we can perceive in their joint use a desire on the part of the author to cast the ecclesia and Christ-among-them as deeply implicated in this world in the created order. There is a rooted, systemic quality to both metaphor groups, qualities that eventually came to define the work and character of the church as Christ's body.

Despite these resonances, however, the metaphorical shift beginning in Col 1:11 away from communal fruit-bearing toward redemption by an all-powerful Christ introduces a theological shift whose effects will be felt throughout the letter. The shift is signaled grammatically as the second-person "you" of 1:3-12 changes abruptly to the first-person "us . . . we" (1:13-14). These pronouns rhetorically unify speaker and audience, but they also change the nature of the utterance: it is no longer an address from one party to another but a proclamation about who "we" are and how things are for all of "us"—namely, that we have been "rescued . . . from the power of darkness and transferred . . . into the kingdom of his beloved Son" (1:13).

E. Elizabeth Johnson points out that this theological shift from possible to completed salvation was meant to destabilize teachings that predicated salvation on the performance of certain rituals and practices and thereby to bring the congregation at Colossae into ecclesial alignment.[8] Whatever the author's intention, however, it is important to note that he felt warranted to shape and revise his theology for the purposes at hand. The shift itself, regardless of its content, suggests that diverse articulations and formulations of Christian faith and practice were still

8. E. Elizabeth Johnson, "Colossians," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 585.

permissible at the time of the writing and may reflect lively conversations within Christian communities to this effect. The very presence of multiple metaphor groups and the author's unself-conscious transition from one to another are traces of the ongoing work of metaphorical production typical of the early ecclesia.

We must also note along with Johnson, however, that the author takes theological liberties here in order to discipline other liberties of which he disapproves in later portions of the letter (Col 1:23; 2:8, 20-23). Overall, the trajectory of the letter as a whole is toward limitation and codification rather than proliferation, toward a "final word" rather than toward freedom of theological expression. As feminist and theopoetic readers, we resist this kind of closure because it has tended over time to exclude women and thwart creative response. Instead, we remind ourselves and other contemporary readers of Colossians to join with our early Christian sisters and brothers behind the text in the ongoing, participative, and vigorous work of imagining our faith. We suggest that, in spite of the systematizing tendencies of Colossians 1, its metaphorical dynamics illustrate and endorse a continual unfolding and enrichment of Christian theological imagination.

The Christ Hymn (1:15-20)

The most extended and significant common tradition in Colossians is this passage of rhythmic liturgical material praising Christ in cosmic and universal terms. The author grounds the letter's exhortations in these beliefs about Christ that the author and congregation share with other assemblies in the early Christian movement. Commonly called "the Christ hymn," Col 1:15-20 stands apart from its context because of its introduction by a relative pronoun, its distinctive vocabulary, its repetition of key words, and its chiastic pattern. Other New Testament hymns that exhibit a similar form and exaltation Christology are John 1:1-18; Phil 2:6-11; and Heb 1:3-4. Called "pre-Pauline" by historical critics, these formulations are dated earlier than the letters themselves and are understood to have been adapted from use in worship and incorporated into the letters. The Christ hymn is the heart of the letter to the Colossians, cited by the author to encourage the recipients and to dissuade them from being led astray by the enigmatic teachers of 2:8-19. Christ's supremacy and ultimacy, declared in the hymn and recalling baptism, relativize the practices and the disagreements about them that lie behind the oblique references to food and drink, observing festivals, new moons,

Colossians 1:15-20

15He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

sabbaths, self-abasement, angelic worship, and visions. Those who have been baptized are freed to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (3:1).

The hymn depicts Christ as all pervasive, an element of every part of the cosmos, whose features and activity align with the way that Jewish Scriptures describe the feminine figure of Wisdom, Sophia (see Prov 8:1-36; Sir 24; Wis 6–9). He is the εἰκὼν ("image") or manifestation of God (cf. Heb 1:3, the "reflection of God's glory").[9] Proverbs 8:31 refers to Wisdom as "God's master builder," and the Colossians hymn emphasizes that he is responsible for creating τὰ πάντα ("all things"; Col 1:15). The phrase is used five times in this passage.[10] It enumerates the powers that he has created: "thrones or dominions or rulers or powers" (1:16). The exclamations use terms of primacy ("firstborn of all creation" [1:15], "firstborn from the dead," "first place," and "head of the body" [1:18]), priority ("before all things" [1:17] and "beginning" [1:18]), and connectivity ("in him all things hold together" [1:17]). He is both the location of the dwelling of the πλήρωμα ("fullness"; 1:19) of God and the instrument of God's reconciliation of "all things" (1:20).

The phrase "through the blood of his cross" (1:20), alluding to the death of Jesus by crucifixion, ties into the mythological language of the hymn. Margaret Y. MacDonald describes the interpretation of the mythological narrative in reference to Christ: "The Christ hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 anchors traditions about divine Wisdom firmly in history by stressing the relationship between the death of Christ and the reconciliation of the universe and by highlighting the indwelling of Christ in the

9. Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Colossians," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 317–18.

10. Col 1:16 (twice), Col 1:17 (πρὸ πάντων, τὰ πάντα), and Col 1:20.

church."[11] If an earlier version of this hymn praised Christ as Wisdom, the phrases "the church" and "through the blood of the cross" (1:18, 20) mark editorial revisions made either by the author of Colossians or earlier in the hymn's composition history. The addition of "church" to further explain "the body" (1:18) shifts the understanding of the body as cosmos, which makes sense in the hymn's larger context, toward an image of body as "church," which is a more circumscribed entity. "The blood of his cross" (1:20) ties the indwelling, reconciliation, and peacemaking of Christ directly to Jesus' death by crucifixion.

As a corporate liturgical expression of faith with origins before its citation in the letter to the Colossians, the Christ hymn represents theological expression that is owned or authored by the ecclesia where women and men sing of Christ together.[12] Rather than attributing all of early Christian language and theological innovation to Paul as an individual leader, faith in Christ and the formation of community are accomplished by the body, the holy and faithful ones, the brothers and sisters. A key element in our feminist re-appropriation of Colossians is imagining the congregation singing this hymn that praises Christ as a permeating, reconciling cosmic force, source of all powers and rulers, and choosing to act out of the freedom given through his death.

To understand the Colossians hymn as having its prototype in Jewish speculation about the feminine Sophia is fruitful for reflection as well. The church's earliest attempts to articulate the meaning of Jesus as creative force and heavenly mediator borrowed from the rich tradition of Wisdom. While male language of son and father dominates in the epistles and gospels, traces of alternative feminine language is heard in these early hymns. As the church took this language of maleness more and more literally, it was used to exclude women from leadership and representative roles. Recovery of the metaphors of creation, mediation, and permeation that Jewish Scripture attributes to Wisdom provides a wealth of material for constructive feminist theology.[13]

11. Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians,* ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 17 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 67.

12. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Rethinking Authorship in the Letters of Paul," in *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,* ed. Shelly Matthews, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and Melanie Johnson Debaufre (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 330–33.

13. For example, Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 40–45.

The language of creation, permeation, and reconciliation in Col 1:15-20 offers metaphorical resources to those who care for the fate of the earth. The Christ hymn in Colossians is, after Rom 8, the most frequently cited text among ecotheologians who seek to foster "creation care."[14] For most of the history of interpretation, commentators insisted that τὰ πάντα ("all things") did not refer to the earth or to nonhuman creation. Modern biblical scholarship supported that conclusion, arguing that the letter's major concern was anthropological and ecclesiological rather than ecological. More recently, however, biblical scholars have acknowledged that the cosmic scope of the hymn is consistent with a reading that includes human and nonhuman creation, and theologians have developed this insight. Renewed attention to reading Scripture with concern for the health of the earth shows that the commentary tradition has assumed the distinction or even the opposition between humans and the earth. In contrast, Col 1:15-20 affirms Christ's fundamental connection with "all things," phrased in the language of praise. As a song voiced by a body of women and men, the hymn can rightly be claimed and owned as the voicing of the faith of women in Christ who empowers them to survive thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers and to promote unity and harmony among humans and the earth.

The belief that Christ is supreme over the thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers does not proceed in self-evident logic to the exhortatory conclusion in Col 3:18-19 that wives should submit to husbands and slaves to masters. The logic is sometimes explained as a response to social pressure from those outside the community. Resolving the contradiction or tension between these theologies and metaphors is the task of most reconstructions of the historical situation of Colossians. Various metaphors can serve as clues to diverse theological positions representing a struggle between kyriarchal and democratic visions of the ecclesia. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Antoinette Wire, and Cynthia Briggs Kittredge have used this strategy in their work, privileging the baptismal theology of the hymns belonging to the community and identifying epistolary attempts to hierarchically structure that freedom as belonging to Paul or to the pseudonymous author(s) of Colossians or Ephesians. Identifying the dynamic of competing visions of the church within the letters allows readers to enter into that conversation in the present.

14. David G. Horrell, *Greening Paul: Reading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 89.

Theopoetic Reflection: Rereading the Bodies

A close look at the structure of the Christ hymn, its central metaphors, and the author's emendations to it elucidates two of these competing visions—the kyriarchal and the democratic—and opens doors for the revival of this conversation today. Operative in the Christ hymn are two central metaphors, the first of which is developed in what is considered the first stanza of the song (Col 1:15-17) and the second of which is developed in the second stanza (1:18-20). Both express Christ as a kind of body and provide a template for Christian self-understanding, worship, and practice. The first, which derives from the Wisdom tradition, expresses Christ as a cosmic and unifying body, through whom and in whom all things have their being and hold together. The second, which derives from the Pauline understanding of Christ as firstborn, expresses Christ as the head of a body, the church.[15] In other words, the hymn figures Christ first as a cosmic, mystical body, and second as a hierarchical, human one.

Feminist commentaries on Colossians have tended to treat the hymn cursorily, focusing instead on the important work of critiquing the household code.[16] Since the household code is, however, based almost exclusively on the hierarchical understanding of Christ's body developed in the second stanza of the hymn—virtually occluding the mystical, cosmic metaphor developed in the first—we consider it imperative to redirect attention to the first stanza as a powerful resource for generating alternative, life-giving readings of the letter as a whole. Here we point toward several of them.

One available and underdeveloped reading of the first stanza of the hymn is aesthetic. In describing Christ as the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), the opening of the hymn invites readers, both original and contemporary, to understand Christ as beauty itself, the divine whole offering itself in the discrete person of Christ—a kenotic offering that makes all other discrete elements of creation and images of God possible. The stanza goes on to bind this classical Greek understanding of beauty with the Hebrew understanding of it as faithful relationship: Christ is not only the image of God but also the "firstborn of all creation," in or by whom "all things in heaven and on earth were created" (1:15-16); he

15. Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 482–83.

16. For example, E. Elizabeth Johnson, "Colossians," 585.

is not only expressive of God but deeply implicated in the created order itself and is that which makes relation and relationship possible.[17]

When we understand Christ as beauty—both revelatory and relational—several alternative paths for Christian living and self-understanding open up. Beauty becomes our primary subject and the contemplation of beauty our primary task as Christians. Rather than subordinating beauty to reason and associating it with the seductive, deceptive powers of the tempter/temptress, we validate, celebrate, and centralize our deep human hunger for beauty, both in worship and in the joys of relationship.[18] We seek experiences and espouse epistemologies that enable us to see reality as translucent and to expect the revelation of God through the discrete elements of creation and the events and relationships of our lives. And, because humans are themselves able to create beauty, we ratify our ongoing responsibility as God-bearers in the world, both through creative works and through the cultivation of deep relationships.

A second available reading of the first stanza of the Christ hymn is theological and phenomenological. It reminds readers of Colossians that, in Christ's function as the very fabric of the cosmos—impulse, channel, and midwife of its being—Christ precedes and creates the very conditions for the human social organizations that give rise to secondary metaphorical understandings of him as, for example, redeemer and rescuer. Understanding Christ as the medium and milieu of all life and all meaning making also encourages an openness to shifting understandings of the cosmos itself and to conversation among those who use different vocabularies to describe ultimate reality.[19] In this expansive view, Christ becomes a field of exploration—an open-ended question—rather than an object of conquest, a body of knowledge, or the best and final answer.

17. Bruno Forte, *Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics,* trans. David Glenday and Paul McPartlan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 25.

18. Raymond Barfield traces Western distrust of the beautiful to its classical origins in *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10–51.

19. Amos Niven Wilder calls for exactly such conversation in his 1976 treatise on language, culture, and theology: "The revolution in cosmology," he writes, "has shocked not only our intellectual but also our imaginative categories. . . . But the mythical cosmology of Scripture and the Christian view of nature . . . have the resources to welcome and order all such new imaginative transactions with our theater of experience." He then cites Colossians and Ephesians as two biblical texts that best "answer the new categories of our modern vision of the creation." *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 1976), 4.

When we understand Christ in this way, we resist the impulse to elevate any single expression or metaphor to the level of absolute truth. We remember that the earliest metaphors for Christ erupted from the soil of a particular place and time, and we recognize and validate alternative metaphorical understandings and models for Christ in other places and times, including our own. We also draw attention to the idea that all things are created "for him" (Col 1:16) and urge an awareness among Christians that our image making of God, through religious language and ritual, is a form of prayer and as such should seek to give back to Christ what he gives to us out of himself.[20] We note that any theological utterance offered as prayer will be marked by a tone of humility (to be distinguished from submissiveness).

A third available reading of the first stanza of the hymn is ethical and springs naturally from the aesthetic and phenomenological understandings of Christ. For when we view Christ as the beautiful medium in which "all things hold together" (Col 1:17), we cannot help but see our own being or our life as a thread in the Christic fabric—and we therefore understand that everything we do affects in some way the tenor and configuration of the universe.[21] In this view, we are responsible not for our personal salvation but for the creation of a just and democratic society in which all women and men may flourish. We are also compelled to understand the universe and our existence within it as events of pure grace and ourselves as bearers of grace through love rather than seekers and earners of it through conformity to behavioral codes.

Conversely, the second stanza of the hymn (Col 1:17-18) offers a template for reality that is shaped like a human body. In its original form, it situated Christ as the "head of the body" (1:18), wherein "the body" referred, presumably, to all reality. But when the author of Colossians inserts both "the church" as an appositive for Christ's body and later "the blood of his cross" (1:20) as the method through which Christ makes peace or holds all things together, the metaphor contracts, as does the scope of Christ himself. Christ is now coequal with the church, serving

20. See Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty back to God, beauty's self and beauty's giver." "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works,* ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 156.

21. "If we do take the interconnectedness of things really seriously," Alan Jones writes, "we are saved from moralism and hurtled into the realm of pure grace." *Journey Into Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 128.

as its head and in some sense contingent upon it. Inversely, as the scope of Christ contracts, the power of the church expands: as Christ's body—rather than one of many bodies held together by Christ—the church becomes that which holds all things together. In this body, however, "all things" have particular roles, functions, and stations, as the author goes on to explain in later parts of the letter.

We can read against the grain of the author's emendations by noting other images in the second stanza that resonate with the cosmic body of the first stanza and that endorse a democratic understanding of the ecclesia. In Col 1:19, for example, as in 1:15, Christ embodies not the church but the "fullness" of God; and in 1:20, as in 1:17, "all things" are reconciled in him. The second stanza also reinforces the relational quality of God-in-Christ by describing the fullness of God as "pleased" (1:19, 20).[22] Emphasizing the nature of Christ as the "fullness" and "pleasure" of God rather than as the head and ruler of the church yields a different understanding of the church, as well. The church ceases to constitute ultimate reality and instead is made up of people who adore God's full and possibly feminine beauty, who are reconciled in Christ through the fullness of relationship, and who are a potential source of pleasure for God and one another.

The Gospel for "You" (1:21-23)

Colossians 1:21-23 brings the affirmation of the cosmic hymn of praise to bear on the local community and its reconciled state with a shift to the second-person-plural address to "you." Here, the author applies or interprets the hymn in relation to the situation of the audience, reiterating their transformation from enmity to holiness, stating a condition of their blamelessness, and tying their continuing in the faith firmly to himself as a servant of the Gospel.

The contrast between past and present, between the "once" (Col 1:21) of opposition to God and the "now" (1:22) of reconciliation, is phrased

22. It is a central contention of so-called "weak theologies" and of process theology that God's power, as love, is purely and necessarily relational. Hierarchical understandings of God, on the other hand, view power as the ability to affect (or please) others without being affected (or pleased). The language of Col 1:19–20 suggests that Hebrew and early Christian understandings of God's power aligned with the former view. For an accessible overview of God's nature and power in process thought, see C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 1993), 7–32.

Colossians 1:21-23

[21]And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, [22]he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— [23]provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

as an existential and ethical contrast between being enemies who do "evil" (1:21) and being "holy and blameless and irreproachable" (1:22). This contrast recalls the experience of conversion, salvation, and baptism and may reflect liturgical formulae. Paul uses the language of enmity and reconciliation in Rom 5:1-11 and conveys the sense of rebellion against God by the Gentiles in Rom 1:18-32.

Linking with the claim in the hymn about Jesus' reconciliation of all things "through the blood of his cross" (Col 1:20), these verses emphasize Jesus' physical death as the means of reconciliation ("in his fleshly body through death" [1:22]; literally, "in the body of flesh"). The believers' transformation, which in 1:13 ("he has rescued us") is exclaimed as decisive, is here modified by a condition: "provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith" (1:23). The author refers for a second time to "the gospel that you heard" (1:5-6) and by doing so connects the proper faith he is urging with the faith of their past. In the verses that follow, which exalt Paul's apostolic status, the author ties the faith they have always had with his own role. This identification of Paul with the gospel, which "has been proclaimed to every creature" (1:23), functions to strengthen his credibility against the vaguely portrayed rival teachers and their teaching to be addressed in 2:8-23.

In Colossians and in the developing Pauline tradition in Ephesians and in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, we observe the gradual shift of the meaning of "faith" as an active relationship of trust in God (Rom 1:16-17) toward a body of teaching, translated into English as "the faith."[23] This shift corresponds with the transition from the church as a loosely organized movement to an organization with leadership offices, clearly defined boundaries with heterodox groups, and a system of transmitting

23. τῇ πίστει in Colossians can be translated "in faith," but the emphasis on continuity with the past, the emphasis on security and steadiness, and the rivalry with other teachings suggests that "the faith" is a better English translation.

its teaching. We see one moment toward this shift in Col 1:23 and in the verses that follow, which stress so emphatically Paul's status as an apostle of a universal Gospel. Feminist readers treat this shift with a hermeneutic of suspicion because, in the movement toward emerging orthodoxy, the voices and leadership of women became erased, eliminated, and prohibited. This understanding of the faith and of offices that protect and preserve it prevailed as official teaching of the church for centuries.

The author claims that one goal or effect of reconciliation is the enabling of Christ "to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him(self)" (Col 1:22). The verb παραστῆσαι ("present") has associations that are sacrificial, legal, and liturgical.[24] When the verb is used in 2 Cor 11:2, the action of presenting is gendered, with the presenter depicted as a man and the one being presented depicted as a woman. In that verse, Paul addresses the congregation as woman, whom he, as father, has promised to one husband. The metaphor of presentation is also used in Eph 5:25-27, in the expansion of the metaphor of church and Christ as wife and husband; there, Christ's love and self-sacrifice for the church is done in order to make her holy and clean so that she can be presented to himself.[25] In Colossians, in contrast with both 2 Cor 11:2 and Eph 5:25-27, the verse works by analogy with sacrifice and with the court of law rather than with a nuptial context. The letter to the Ephesians genders what in Colossians is neutral. Colossians 1:28, in which "everyone" is presented, provides further support for the non-gendered character of this presenting.[26]

24. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 72–73. The sacrificial meaning of "present" is exemplified in Rom 12:2. The language of "holy" and "blameless" occurs in Heb 9:14; 1 Pet 1:19; Exod 29:37-38; and Num 6:14. Romans 14:10 and 2 Cor 4:14 use the verb in a legal context. Jude 24–25 has a liturgical dimension. See also Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon,* Hermeneia, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 64–65.

25. See Sarah J. Tanzer, "Ephesians," in *Searching the Scriptures,* 336–37.

26. MacDonald reads male/female imagery from Eph 5:26-27 into Col 1:22: "God is here understood as acting like an honorable Mediterranean male who protects the reputation of his bride (the community) and presents her worth to the world outside. The ideal community is characterized in much the same way as a Mediterranean woman who displays appropriate shame (concern for reputation)." MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 76.

The theological movement toward imaging the church as a woman and Christ as a man may find its origins in the impulse in Paul's letters and in those written in his name to image the actor/subject as Paul (or Christ or God) and the congregation/object as feminine. Colossians does not take this step explicitly, but the author of Ephesians does elaborate and expand this highly gendered symbolic universe. In order to resist the pacification and feminization of the congregation, feminist readers intentionally decenter Paul and attribute theological creativity to the community. Their "faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints" (Col 1:4), lauded by the author in the thanksgiving, is read back into the historical reconstruction throughout.

Theopoetic Reflection: Being as Hearing

In Col 1:21-23 the author allows his theology to break down so that his authority can be built up.[27] To say "You *have been* reconciled to him, *as long as* you maintain the faith as I do" is to say that your redemption is complete but contingent, reversible, and dependent on your conformity to "the faith" (1:23)—which is to say it is imperfect and potentially outside those things held together in Christ. Furthermore, to say "You are saved, as long as you do what I say and do" is to inaugurate a church hierarchy in which some members have a greater and truer theological understanding and are responsible for modeling it and requiring it of those with a lesser understanding. It is, in other words, to inaugurate an understanding of church that includes intermediaries and a hierarchy of membership and authority. We can imagine listeners at Colossae who were familiar with the language of coercion and hierarchy—including slaves and women—both hearing it and resisting it in these verses. We can also imagine listeners at Colossae who were familiar with the hymn as an expression of Christian unity-in-diversity feeling unsettled by the author's attempt to discipline both Christ and "the faith" (theologically) and them (corporately).

And yet—as in other parts of the letter—the disciplinary gives way at least momentarily to the liberating: listeners are asked to remain steadfast in faithfulness to the Gospel, "which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (Col 1:23). Since the real work of proclaiming the gospel through spoken and written language is very much in progress in

27. D'Angelo, "Colossians," 314.

65 CE, this notion must be understood metaphysically: by and through our very creatureliness—our life itself—we hear, experience, and in some sense are the word. Such an idea is radically democratic and competes with almost all theologies built on reward and punishment, but it is nevertheless consistent with much of this letter's own theology: the organic imagery of the greeting in which the Gospel is "bearing fruit and growing in the whole world" (1:6), the cosmic understanding of Christ in the first stanza of the hymn in which "all things have been created through him and for him" (1:16), and even in the realized eschatology of the verses describing our redemption as complete (1:12-13, 22). It also aligns with inherited understandings of Christ rooted in the Wisdom tradition and in the postresurrection experiences of Jesus' followers.

Feminist and theopoetic readings of these verses might emphasize the notion that we "hear" the "gospel" at the level of our very being, through our createdness itself. They might also observe that existential participation in God's word gives dignity to all people and creatures, as well as giving the right and the responsibility to proclaim God's word in ways they have perceived and experienced it to be true. In our view, such readings will help bring "the hope promised by the gospel" to fruition (1:23).

Presentation of Paul as Cosmic Apostle and Revealer of Mystery (1:24–2:5)

The exhortation in the letter to the Colossians to continue right living (walking) has been undergirded by the recollection of baptismal conversion and by the citation of the Christ hymn. It is further supported by an extended passage, spoken in the first-person-singular "I" voice of Paul, that elaborates on his role as "servant [διάκονος] of this gospel" (Col 1:23). Crucial to his authority are Paul's suffering, his divine commission to "make the word of God fully known" (1:25), and his role to "present everyone mature in Christ" (1:28). The universal scope of his authority is emphasized by the repeated "all"/"everyone" (1:23, 28; 2:1). All of these aspects of Paul's role as διάκονος are rehearsed in order to strengthen his credibility for the refutation of the "philosophy" (2:8) and its proponents that is to follow. The length and detail of this passage and Paul's claim to be struggling for "all who have not seen me face to face" (2:1) shows how the claim of authority of the person of Paul is moving beyond personal relationships with particular congregations to general recognition by all/everyone.

Colossians 1:24–2:5

[24]I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. [25]I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, [26]the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. [27]To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. [28]It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. [29]For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

[2:1]For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. [2]I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, [3]in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. [4]I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. [5]For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

The phrase "servant of this gospel" (Col 1:23) is not used elsewhere in Paul's letters. Here, its meaning may come close to that of a term for a formal "office." The author identifies himself with Christ and with God. First, he is the one who suffers; he is "completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of the church" (1:24). The interpretive tradition has been troubled by the implication that something in Christ's afflictions was insufficient and had to be completed by Paul. The author is speaking of his vicarious suffering on behalf of the community that is analogous or patterned after that of Christ. The word for suffering, θλῖψις ("tribulation"), is also the word that is used to describe the suffering that precedes the end time. Suffering and martyrdom, the fate of the prophets, came to be authenticating marks of authority in the early church.

The motif of revealing what is hidden, the use of the term "mystery" (1:26), and the sense that history is culminating in this time of revelation are at home in apocalyptic language. That the term "wisdom" occurs twice (1:28; 2:3) in this passage suggests that the dispute with those who commend "philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8) may be about wisdom—what it is and how to attain it.

Even within Paul's claim to being a divinely commissioned revealer, there is acknowledgment that the mystery has been revealed, not only to

one person, but "to his saints" (Col 1:26). The "glory of this mystery" is defined as "Christ in you" (1:27). This affirmation implies that Christ is in the community as a mystery. This indwelling language does not use "Lord." It evokes a metaphorical and even mystical relationship that is not ruled by an exalted "Lord."

In Colossians, we see an intensified presentation of the author as an apostolic authority of Paul as teacher, identified with and representing Christ, standing in for God, who claims a relationship as teacher and revealer to those he does not personally know in order to oppose erroneous teachings. While Paul's undisputed letters employ a strong authorial "I" and cite Paul's life as model and proof (Gal 1:18; Phil 3; Rom 9:1-3), Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Letters develop this motif and relate the reputation of Paul as imprisoned hero to the fact of his absence from the community. Using Max Weber's sociological categories, Margaret MacDonald explains this strategy in Colossians as the assertion of institutional authority in response to the posthumous fading of Paul's charismatic authority.[28] Biblical scholarship used the term "early catholicism" or "proto-orthodoxy" to describe this development in the New Testament canon.

This particular historical reconstruction raises questions for feminist interpretation. MacDonald's use of Weber's social-scientific model treats the hierarchicalization of the ecclesia, the development of offices, and the institutionalization of authority as "inevitable." The theory explains but does not evaluate or intervene. If the process of community formation is imagined not as a linear trajectory toward hierarchy but as a complex of conflicting impulses and positions, then readers will recognize the tension between the author's stress on Paul as necessary corrector and apostle and the affirmation of the mystery as "Christ in you" (Col 1:27). Reading against the rhetorical grain of the text can reveal options or visions in the ecclesia that experience authority from within ("Christ in you") or from the experience of baptism into Christ's death and resurrection.

Theopoetic Reflection: Reimagining the Body

Colossians 1:15-23 can be read as a drawing-down of Christ from cosmic abstraction into physical form through the literalization of the metaphor of the body. The process looks something like this:

28. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 2–3, 7.

Wisdom/Sophia/Cosmic Christ, body of all (1:15-17)

↓

Christ, head of the cosmic body (1:18)

↓

Christ, head of the church (1:18)

↓

Christ's "fleshly body" as agent of redemption, *if* you continue in the faith (1:22-23)

↓

as does Paul, servant of the Gospel, whose suffering "completes" that of Christ "for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (1:23-24)

Of course, any metaphorical understanding of Christ as a body—physical, ecclesial, or cosmic—has its origins in the existence of Jesus of Nazareth himself: it was through his corporeality that followers came to know Wisdom/Sophia/Christ and the Godhead in radically new ways. In this sense, and according to Christian doctrine, Jesus is the literalization of God—the concentration of divinity, of meaning itself, into a discrete nexus.

And yet the drawing-down outlined above ends not with the body of Christ but with the body of Paul; Paul completes and makes present (even from a distance) the suffering of Christ and therefore the redemption available to others.[29] This involvement of Paul "in" Christ's body and as preserver of Christ's body, the church, has had devastating effects for wo/men.[30] It has redoubled the maleness both of Christ and of church leadership, and it has "othered" the female body within the institutional church. It has promoted an institutional forgetting of Sophia-Christ as cosmic body and a suppression of contemplative and other practices

29. The author's concern for making his own suffering body present in the minds of his recipients (even while acknowledging its physical absence in Col 1:4) raises questions within the larger context of the letter, one of whose central aim is to challenge the Colossians' ascetic practices. Why is the author at such great pains to overlay or substitute their bodily suffering with his own? If a suffering body is a credential for authority at this point in the church's evolution, what about the Colossians' suffering through self-denial makes it illegitimate?

30. See xiv n. 2 for an explanation of the use of this term.

that nurture its remembrance.[31] It has shaped and ordained both popular and doctrinal visions of Christ not as an ontological *all* but as a male and material *this*, a being whose redemptive power is lodged in a single occasion of physical suffering ("through the blood of his cross" [Col 1:20]), whose ongoing physical presence is constituted by the church, and whose words and promises (i.e., the contents of "the faith" [1:23]) are entrusted exclusively to Paul and his institutional heirs. It has led the church to understand itself as primary rather than participatory in the human community. Finally, the conflation of Christ/Paul/church has prevented full imaginative engagement with Pauline Scripture and encouraged instead the literal reading of it, "according to God's commission [to Paul] to make the word of God fully known" (1:25).

A feminist and theopoetic reading of Colossians draws different conclusions about the nature of the body of Christ and the church. We understand the body of Jesus as primarily human, not primarily male. We understand the incarnation as an invitation to view all bodies as symbolic participants in a reality greater than the temporal one that makes bodies different. We understand the body of Christ expressed in the ecclesia to be female and male alike (see Gal 3:28), democratic, inclusive of "every creature under heaven" (Col 1:23), fruit-bearing, and hopeful (1:5-6). We encourage rituals and practices that remember and celebrate Christ/Wisdom/Sophia as a cosmic body. We recommend contemplative prayer as a way to raise awareness of our own bodies' absolute and constant immersion in the cosmic body of Christ. We reject literal readings of Scripture as further crucifixions of God's word and call instead for resurrection readings that roll back stones, shock and surprise witnesses, and breathe life and air into stale places. And instead of understanding suffering as a credential for authority or a prerequisite for redemption, we acknowledge it as one of the many experiences that make up the human condition, and we honor it as one way among many that wisdom may be gained.[32]

31. The post-Vatican II contemplative prayer revival has generated multiple writings that account for this suppression and attempt to reverse it. One of the best and earliest is Thomas Merton's *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969; New York: Doubleday, 1996). For a more recent treatment of this subject, see Cynthia Bourgeault, "Centering Prayer and Christian Tradition," in *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (New York: Cowley Publications, 2004), 113–52.

32. For a personal, feminist, and theological account of the wisdom to be gained through suffering, see Melanie May, *A Body Knows: A Theopoetics of Death and Resurrection* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

Finally, we follow to its logical conclusion the fate of the body of Christ. If Jesus' friends' understanding of him could only be transformed through the death and resurrection of his body, we wonder whether the church, as Christ's body, may be called to similar transformation. We grant that our understanding of church itself may need to die in order to further illuminate "the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations" (Col 1:26).

Colossians 2:6-23

Warning against Practices

The Warning (2:6-23)

After asserting Paul's apostolic credentials and identifying with the struggles of the wide group of churches, the author states the letter's main theme (Col 2:6-7) and then begins the exhortation to continued proper conduct. The author employs positive affirmations to recall baptism but uses vivid, dramatic, and violent metaphors to describe Christ's accomplishments (2:9-15). "Circumcision" (2:11), "putting off the body of the flesh" (2:11), and being "buried" (2:12), "raised" (2:12), "nail[ed]" (2:14), and "disarmed" (2:15) all happen "in him." The author also warns against hostile teachers (2:8, 16, 18) whom he referrs to indefinitely as "anyone" ("do not let anyone" [2:16]). He sharply contrasts their insincerity and wrong motivation with Paul's reliability as explicated in Col 1:24–2:5. The author refers to the teachers' means of persuasion "through philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8), practices they might criticize "in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths" (2:16), and injunctions they obey, which he dismisses as "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (2:21). The polemic concludes with a summary of the ineffectiveness of the regulations, anticipating the author's own positive exhortation that will follow, which is grounded in traditions of resurrection and baptism (3:1-17). This passage draws on the Christ hymn explicitly in 2:9 with the language of "fullness"

Colossians 2:6-23

6As you therefore have received
Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live
your lives in him, 7rooted and built up in
him and established in the faith, just as
you were taught, abounding in thanks-
giving.

8See to it that no one takes you
captive through philosophy and empty
deceit, according to human tradition,
according to the elemental spirits of the
universe, and not according to Christ.
9For in him the whole fullness of deity
dwells bodily, 10and you have come
to fullness in him, who is the head of
every ruler and authority. 11In him also
you were circumcised with a spiritual
circumcision, by putting off the body of
the flesh in the circumcision of Christ;
12when you were buried with him in
baptism, you were also raised with
him through faith in the power of God,
who raised him from the dead. 13And
when you were dead in trespasses
and the uncircumcision of your flesh,
God made you alive together with him,
when he forgave us all our trespasses,
14erasing the record that stood against
us with its legal demands. He set this
aside, nailing it to the cross. 15He dis-
armed the rulers and authorities and
made a public example of them, tri-
umphing over them in it.

and "dwelling." The entire strategy of relativizing and minimizing the practices of the unnamed teachers is grounded in the exclamation of the supremacy, primacy, and priority of Christ proclaimed in the hymn.

The verb παρελάβετε, "you have received," in 2:6 is used for the rabbinic concept of receiving a tradition and in Christian writings (1 Cor 15:1). The recipients, who have received Christ Jesus the Lord, are urged literally to "walk," περιπατεῖτε, in him. The person Jesus, the Messiah, is like the law in which one would "walk." The first participle shifts to the organic image of having been "rooted" and the second to the architectural one of being "built up." Neither action is literally consistent with the image of Christ Jesus as human body. The verb βεβαιούμενοι, translated as "established" implies staying firm in faith (there is no "the" in Greek). The phrase "as you were taught" links the exhortation to tradition, to unnamed teachers presumably known to the audience. James D. G. Dunn paraphrases the opening phrase as "you have received the proclamation of Christ as Lord" and interprets "in him" to mean "in the Lord."[1] Although there is a definite emphasis on Christ Jesus the Lord as something "taught," the metaphors imply not only correct teaching but also participation and

1. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 140.

[16]Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. [17]These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. [18]Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, [19]and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

[20]If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, [21]"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"? [22]All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. [23]These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

incorporation into a reality. The exhortations in Colossians commend the spiritual posture of thanksgiving (1:3, 12; 3:15, 16, 17; 4:2).

The word translated "see to it" (βλέπετε; Col 2:8) is better translated more sharply as "watch out."[2] The danger to avoid is someone who "takes you captive" as if to kidnap you or forcibly enslave you. The word συλαγωγῶν, a *hapax legomenon* (a word occurring only once) in the New Testament, describes the capture and taking of booty in war and conveys the illegitimacy of the takeover.[3] The association of this word, "takes captive," with the enslavement of captives has led some to connect this verse with the slaves addressed in 3:18–4:1. The unusual word conveys the serious consequences of following the suspect teachers.

The word "philosophy," another word that appears only here in the New Testament, has lent support to the reconstruction of the Colossian opponents as adherents to Hellenistic philosophical speculation such as Pythagoreanism or Stoic philosophy. The term "philosophy" is used, however, to describe a wide range of thought, including Jewish groups described by Josephus.[4] "Philosophy" is not itself a term of contempt.

2. See also Gal 5:15; 1 Cor 8:9, 10:12, 18; Phil 3:2.

3. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia, trans. William R. Poehlman and Robert J. Karris, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 94.

4. Bell. 2:119; Ant. 18:11.

But the adjectives that describe the philosophy, "vain and deceitful," indicate that it is untrustworthy.

The phrase "according to human tradition" is also a negative characterization (see also Col 2:18, "by a human way of thinking"). Mark 7:8 uses "human tradition" as a negative contrast to Jesus' teaching. The author's strategy here is to characterize the suspect teachers' teaching as merely human tradition, while treating the Gospel, the teaching the congregation has known, as divinely revealed. The contrast in the second part of the sentence in 2:8 is between κατὰ χριστόν ("according to Christ") and κατᾶ τά στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου ("according to the elemental spirits of the universe"). The "elemental spirits of the universe" might mean evil powers that control the universe or earthly rulers and authorities. In the next verse Christ is said to be the head/source of all rulers and authorities, and in 2:15 God "disarmed" the rulers and authorities.

The phrases in 2:9 may be a fragment of a hymn and/or a reference to the hymn in Col 1. It begins with the conjunction "for" (ὁτι) and the phrase "in him" (ἐν αὐτῷ). "You have come to fullness in him" (2:10) speaks to completion in Christ and the lack of need of supplementation. Christ's superiority and priority are reasserted. The author's claim about Christ means empowerment for the one who has been baptized and lack of fear in the face of threats from any and all rulers and authorities.

A series of vivid metaphors follows these assertions to elaborate on the effects Christ has on the believer. The first metaphor describes the addressees as having been circumcised with a circumcision (ἀχειροποιήτῳ), literally, "not made with hands," and translated in the NRSV as "spiritual circumcision" (2:11). Circumcision is a ritual marker of identity for Jewish males. Baptism (2:12) is analogous because it too marks initiation into a community, but, unlike circumcision, baptism is gender-inclusive. The unusual phrase "circumcision of Christ" is described as "putting off the body of the flesh," which refers to the renunciation of sin as though by removing a garment (2:11). As in Rom 8:3-9, sinfulness is identified with the flesh, here "the body of the flesh." In the second image the author describes baptism as having been "buried in baptism with Christ" and at the same time "also raised with him through faith" (2:12). Romans 6:3 employs this imagery as well, but in Romans being raised is anticipated in the future—"so we too might walk in newness of life"—rather than having already occurred. You were dead in sin and made alive (Rom 6:8) by having trespassed and been forgiven (Col 1:14).

The phrase "forgiveness of sins" does not appear in the undisputed Pauline letters, but the author of Colossians uses the image to speak of

the major result of God's act in Christ: "he forgave us all our trespasses" (Col 2:13). The forgiveness of "trespasses" or sins is described as "erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands" and then further elaborated as "setting it aside, nailing it to the cross" (2:14). The "record" refers to the sentence of punishment that is lifted when sins are forgiven. The operative comparison is between God's forgiveness and God destroying sin by crucifying it. The image compares the record of punishment (negative) with Jesus (innocent, positive). It is similar to the idea in Rom 6:8 that when one dies with Christ, one destroys sin. In another parallel descriptive sentence, God is said to have "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them" (2:15), as though they were captives paraded in a victory procession.

The image of total conquest of the powers through baptism undergirds the author's warnings in the next verses. The author defends the addressees against the judgment of others "in matters of food and drink or observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths." These are denigrated as shadows in contrast to the "substance" (σῶμα; Col 2:17), which literally means "body." The author opposes those who would demand other practices described as "self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions" (2:18). There is little agreement on precisely what practices are referred to here, but it is likely that some kind of ascetic practices were recommended by the opposing teachers to enhance visionary experience.[5] The author's rhetoric associates these practices with τῆς σαρκός (2:18), literally, the "flesh" (translated in the NRSV as "by a human way of thinking") and constructs them as inferior to "holding fast to the head," which nourishes and holds together the whole body. Here, the image of "head" from 1:18 is repeated, and the body is elaborated with the physical details of "ligaments and sinews" (2:19). The emphasis in this image is on physical connection rather than on submission to a superior power or superior member of a hierarchy. The operative contrast in Col 2:20-24 is between the things of flesh, the world, and the human and those things that are true wisdom, truly effective, and permanent. The prohibitions quoted—"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (2:21)—refer to ascetic practices that were believed to be effective in mastering the flesh.

5. Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Colossians," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 319–21. See also Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians,* ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 17 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 119–22.

This section of the letter provides the evidence on which historians of religion and biblical scholars attempt to identify the erroneous teaching and its adherents whom the author opposes. Nevertheless, no known position in antiquity can account for all the elements mentioned in the passage. Labels applied to the "philosophy" (2:8) have included Gnosticism, Judaism, Hellenistic philosophy, Cynic philosophy, and syncretism, which is the intermingling and combining of various beliefs and practices. Some reconstructions picture an active proselytizing sect modeled on the opponents in Galatians.[6] Others imagine pressure from religious practices in the culture that caused Christians to adapt or modify their convictions with random attachment to regulations and prohibitions. Morna Hooker has questioned whether there are actual opponents in Colossae or if the author is simply arguing with speculative possibilities.[7] Another major challenge is that the passage is polemical, not descriptive, and it is impossible to know from the author's negative portrait how the teachers themselves understood the philosophy, its practices, and its relationship with Christian faith.

The most persuasive constructions of the opponents' teaching combine esteem for visions and for the practices of fasting and physical self-denial that would enhance them. The phrase "worship of angels" (2:18) is worship with angels, a feature of Second Temple texts and texts in the New Testament.[8] The strong stress on worship in Colossians suggests that worship is one of the contested issues, along with "mystery," "wisdom," and the meaning of "in Christ." Commentators on Colossians refer to the opponents with terms that reflect their reconstruction as "visionaries" (Sumney),[9] "ascetics" (MacDonald), or "errorists" (Witherington).[10]

Scholarly approaches to "the Colossian heresy" participate in what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has named the dynamics of "othering."[11] Commentators have identified with the position of the author, Paul, and constructed the alternative position negatively, in line with the author's

6. Dunn, *The Epistles*, 23–35.

7. Morna D. Hooker, "Were There False Teachers in Colossae?" in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, ed. Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 315–31.

8. D'Angelo, "Colossians," 319–21.

9. Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

10. Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

11. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 180–82.

polemical rhetoric. A feminist approach to historical reconstruction of the situation of Colossians, however, understands that the position(s) described by the author of Colossians is a theological/practical possibility whose contours and practitioners are forgotten and lost to history. The position is of value theologically because, in response to it, this author made a rhetorical argument for Christ's supremacy and the efficacy of baptism. It is also valuable to reconstruct the teaching if it was implicated in practices the author disapproved of and therefore motivated the invocation of the "household code" in Col 3:18–4:1. Scholars link the "philosophy" with the exhortation to submission in the household in different ways. Margaret Y. MacDonald sees that female asceticism may have led to the reaffirmation of marriage in Col 3:18–4:1.[12] Others argue that, despite the far-reaching transformation of baptism, Christians had to continue to live in the hierarchically structured world of household and empire.[13]

Feminist scholars have also made attempts to work against the dynamics of othering by sympathetically reconstructing the positions of those Paul opposes. Antoinette Wire reconstructs the theological position of the women prophets whom Paul opposes in 1 Corinthians.[14] She argues that women prophets in Corinth interpret their baptism as allowing them to participate in the resurrection and to withdraw from sexual relations in marriage. In our discussion, we extend Wire's argument to reconstruct a possible historical situation behind Colossians and argue that the baptismal self-understanding of women in the Colossian community was close to that of the women prophets in Corinth with whom Paul disputed. For example, both groups of women understood the resurrection to be a present reality that gave them freedom from the oppression of rulers and powers. The Christ hymn of Col 1:15-20 as well as the dramatic interpretation of the disarming and destroying of the powers (Col 2:15) provided the imaginative resources for their convictions. "Mystery" was a key term for them and referred to their insight into Christ. The instructions of the household/church code were introduced to ensure that the structure of the patriarchal family would remain intact. When the rhetorical efforts of Colossians were perceived

12. Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 17 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 162.

13. Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Household Code and Wisdom Mode of Colossians," *JSNT* 21 (1999): 93–112.

14. Antoinette Wire, *The Corinthian Woman Prophets: A Reconstruction Through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

as unsuccessful or requiring supplementation, the author of the letter to the Ephesians revised Colossians, omitting the hymn and expanding the household code in a way that defined unity as hierarchy and the mystery as marriage.[15]

The value of a theoretical reconstruction is not that it be accepted as historical "fact" but that it opens up new possibilities for imagining and debating theological possibilities in the epistles. To imagine women as active agents who hold positions, adopt practices, and debate their efficacy is to interrupt the dynamics of othering and to ask more nuanced and complex questions of a text. Might women in the community have been attracted to the ascetic practices mentioned as a way to gain visionary experience and access to the divine? What happens to women, for example, when "the circumcision" is used as a phrase to describe all people? How do historical women receive the "spiritual circumcision" (Col 2:11) to describe Jesus' death? Is mastery of the flesh an issue only for male spirituality in this cultural and historical context, or was it equally relevant and discussed as parallel with female mastery? These questions of meaning in historical context interrelate with contemporary questions of meaning and practice. By posing such questions, feminist readers open a space in which we may also ask whether the theological solution of Colossians—Christ has triumphed over the powers, but women and slaves are still subdued—is the inevitable or only resolution.

Theopoetic Reflection: Practicing Difference

We suggested earlier that a theopoetic appreciation for contrast and multiplicity within the wholeness of Christ aligns in at least one important sense with the realized eschatology the letter attempts to advance. The author claims the baptized, the members of the body of Christ, have "come to fullness in him" (Col 2:10) and "were also raised with him" (2:12) *even as* they are involved in differences of opinion and practice—not later, after they resolve their differences, or only earlier, before there were differences. This implied *even as* is significant because it is consistent with the Christ hymn's understanding of Christ as the matrix in which all things—even differences of opinions and practices—hold together and are already redeemed. The claim of realized eschatology is not meant to discourage the pursuit of ecclesial unity, however. To the contrary, it

15. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, *Community and Authority: The Rhetoric of Obedience in the Pauline Tradition*, HTS (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

underscores the idea that the pursuit of unity, the striving itself, is the process in which and out of which we are ceaselessly born into Christ.

From a feminist and theopoetic perspective, the most urgent striving for our time is toward renewed awareness of the fundamental interdependence, dignity, and spiritual capacity of all people and toward the related awareness that the number and varieties of practices that may facilitate such awareness are unlimited. For both the author of Colossians and the authors of orthodoxy in the early church, the striving toward unity took a different, more prescriptive form, one that imagined the (church) body as primarily hierarchical and competitive with other, illegitimate entities. The author's warning in Col 2:8 against those who would take them "captive through philosophy" or "empty deceit, according to human tradition . . . and not according to Christ" sanctions such thinking. Further, it introduces the notion of permissible captivity: the warning is not against captivity *per se* but against captivity that is not "according to Christ."

Verses 9-15 describe captivity in Christ variously as "com[ing] to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority" (2:10), as a "spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh" (2:11), as being "buried" and "raised with him" (2:12), and as having sins forgiven by "erasing the record" and "nailing it to the cross" (2:14). The passage concludes by developing the image of Christ as a military victor, not only nailing sin to the cross but also having "disarmed the rulers and authorities" and making "a public example of them" (2:15). This cycle of metaphors begins and ends with images of captivity and is also populated by images of both "fullness" (2:10) and fragmentation ("putting off," 2:11).

Feminist commentators argue that the images used to describe captivity in Christ "are likely to have encouraged double consciousness in women and slaves, demanding that they deny their subjected status in the religious realm while submitting to it in the social world."[16] Spiritually, in Christ, women may be circumcised and slaves may have their debts erased, but in the actual physical, social, and economic worlds, this cannot be so. The author here lays the groundwork both for his denunciation of the Colossians' ascetic and communal practices (Col 2:16–3:17) and for his introduction of the household code (3:18-25). By here constructing a spiritual realm that is both hierarchical (under the

16. D'Angelo, "Colossians," 320.

head of Christ) and egalitarian (erasing sexual, social, and economic difference), he can later proceed to reconstruct the sexual, social, and economic realm along the same contours: hierarchical in some ways, but not in others.

The images may have encouraged double consciousness, but we cannot know whether they succeeded. We can imagine women at Colossae with a different baptismal self-understanding resisting the author's metaphorical choices, particularly his assumption that captivity to Christ—rather than freedom in Christ—is the central effect of the sacrament. While such women may have welcomed the cosmic image of "fullness" in Christ (Col 2:9, 10), they may have had difficulty grasping how "fullness" exists in Christ as "head of every ruler" (2:10), since the head is a single anatomical part, or how "fullness" is realized through circumcision, a putting-off rather than a filling-up. The cognitive dissonance introduced by these mixed metaphors may have resulted not in double-consciousness (which happens when a subject accepts two contradictory understandings of reality) but in heightened and vigorous debate regarding the most appropriate language for the reality of the baptismal experience.

After a theological statement of Christ's accomplishments (forgiving, erasing, and nailing sin to the cross; disarming rulers and authorities), Col 2:16-23 offers a series of injunctions against certain practices and regulations regarding food, drink, the observation of festivals, and worship rituals, as well as the disqualifying judgment of others and self-abasing actions. The transition hinges on the word "therefore" (2:6): because Christ has disarmed earthly rulers and authorities, you *therefore* should not allow earthly authorities to influence you. This logic takes for granted the accuracy of the metaphors of domination and captivity. Women who experienced baptism as freedom in Christ rather than as captivity to Christ may have questioned this assumption.

The author elaborates his objection to the practices in three additional ways. First, he claims that they keep the people of Colossae from "holding fast to the head" (Col 2:19) and thus from being held together and nourished by the ligaments and sinews that grow from it—a metaphor that grafts a strange organicism onto the image posed earlier of Christ as head of the church. A second objection is that the practices are said to have the "appearance of wisdom" and piety but in fact fail to check self-indulgence (2:23). According to the logic of these first two objections, then, spiritually healthy practices would be those that *do* participate in the organic body of Christ and *do* check self-indulgence. Regardless

of the author's understanding of the Colossians' practices, however, it is possible that those practices nurtured closeness with Christ and community and checked forms of self-indulgence the author did not recognize—including, for example, passivity and conformity. A third justification for avoiding certain teachings and practices is that they belong to "the world" and are "simply human commands and teachings" (2:20, 22). A feminist reading of this claim would ask how, when, and why some human commands and teachings (such as those that follow in Colossians 3) are given divine status while others are not, and, furthermore, would question the validity of such judgments when the group of individuals making them are the beneficiaries. A theopoetic reading of this claim would admit different judgments. It would acknowledge that the divine voice often registers within a given practice or teaching for one person or group, but not for others, and that a subject's experience of a practice or a command and the fruits it yields are greater measures of its spiritual value than the practice or command itself.

Such readings are consistent with the understanding of the spiritual life expressed in the first stanza of the Christ hymn and echoed by the author in Col 2:17: certain practices "are only a shadow of what is to come," he writes, "but the substance belongs to Christ." In other words, the practices, as shadows, take the shape of Christ, point to the substance of Christ, and participate in Christ in some formal way. According to the combination of this metaphor, the cosmology of the hymn, and the anatomical imagery of 2:19, even practices questioned or dismissed by some parties or authorities can be understood as belonging to the fabric of Christ. One wonders whether the author of Colossians felt the full force of his own mystical-theological claims.

Colossians 3:1–4:1

Exhortation to Those Who Are in Christ

Focus on the Household Code

The polemic in the letter to the Colossians against false teaching and irrelevant, unnecessary, and ineffective practices concludes in 2:23. The author then presents a sustained positive exhortation describing the virtues and mode of behavior appropriate for those who have been raised with Christ that extends from 3:1 through 4:6. It includes the passage of instructions to members of the family or household—wives, husbands, children, parents, slaves, and masters—that New Testament scholarship has named the "household code." Because this passage in Colossians, along with its kindred texts in Eph 5:21–6:9; Titus 2:1-10; and 1 Pet 2:18–3:7 and centuries of interpretation, have by their proclamation and interpretation throughout centuries of Christian tradition reinforced and maintained the structure of patriarchal marriage and the institution of slavery, we will give particular attention to this passage, asking how it coheres with the argument of the letter, what tensions and critical questions it introduces and provokes for interpretation, and how it offers life for women today.

Colossians 3:1-11

[1]So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2]Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, [3]for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. [4]When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

[5]Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). [6]On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. [7]These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. [8]But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. [9]Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices [10]and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. [11]In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Clothed with the New Self (3:1-11)

Death with Christ introduced the argument in Col 2:20-23. Colossians 3 begins with having been "raised with Christ" as the condition for the encouragement to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (3:1). The instruction to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is" is the sharply contrasted alternative to the prohibitions and regulations urged by the opponents. The logic is that Christ's death and resurrection have definitively given believers all that they need. They therefore need not give attention to "things that are on earth" (3:2). The spatial image of Christ being physically "above" directs the hearers' thinking away from human "commands and teachings" (2:22), "human tradition" (2:8), "a human way of thinking" (2:18), and having "belonged to the world" (2:20). Instead, the believers are to participate in the resurrection life with Christ.

The language of hiddenness, revealing, and glory recalls "the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you" (Col 1:27). "Christ," repeated four times in 3:1-4, is the center of this exhortation. While 1:27 spoke of indwelling, "Christ in you," Col 3:3 speaks of life "hidden with Christ in God." The injunction to seek the things that are above and the assertion of the present participation of the faithful in Christ's resurrection are in tension with the instructions to members of the household later in this passage. Many interpreters simply assert that, although those addressed live life on a higher plane, they must continue to live in

society as fitting to their social status.[1] When combined with the household code, "seek the things that are above, where Christ is" becomes for subordinates an escapist or otherworldly existence.

The radical shift from death to life that is enacted in baptism is the basis for the author's commands to "put to death" vices (3:5-9) and to "clothe yourselves" (3:12) with virtues (3:12-15). The vices enumerated in the list in 3:5 are all associated with sexuality, and those in 3:8 are related to fractious relations among people. Baptismal imagery saturates these verses: the image of putting sin to death (3:5), the stripping or taking off of the old self—literally, the personified "old self"—and putting on the new (3:9), and renewal in "the image of its creator" (3:10) restored to the image of God in Gen 1:26-27. Baptism into Jesus' death requires renouncing evil and embracing goodness.

The participation of the faithful in the story of Jesus' death and resurrection through baptism transforms the character of the community as radically as it changes the behavior of individuals. Major social divisions are no longer relevant; they are radically relativized. In Col 3:11, a relative clause after ὅπου ("where") proclaims that these differences no longer exist: "Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free." "Barbarian" and "Scythian" follow the same pattern of opposing pairs: "Barbarian" refers to the far northern reaches of the world, and "Scythian" to the southern.[2] This assertion is a variation of the baptismal formula, cited also in 1 Cor 12:12-13 and Gal 3:28. Like Gal 3:28, this formula is used in the context of "putting on" Christ in baptism. Unlike Galatians, however, the Colossians version does not include "male and female." Margaret Y. MacDonald argues that the author may have omitted the gender pair to deny support to ascetic women in the community who had been influenced by the false teaching. The concluding summary, "Christ is all and in all," alludes to the Christ hymn (Col 1:17). It is difficult to imagine how slaves would have heard this exultant acclamation from the ritual of baptism followed by the injunction to "obey earthly masters in everything" (3:22).

Theopoetic Reflection: Renewing Our Selves

These verses contain seed language for the development over time of both contemplative practices ("your life is hidden with Christ in God,"

1. Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 176.

2. Sumney, *Colossians*, 206.

Col 3:3) and, much later, psycho-spiritual vocabularies that speak of the authentic self ("you have stripped off the old self . . . [and] clothed yourselves with the new self," 3:9-10). A theopoetically sensitive reading of this passage is aware of the many gifts of self-understanding it has offered us over time. It also understands the spatial and temporal metaphors *as* metaphors rather than as literal descriptions of the created order. It recognizes "things that are above," not as things that rule or rank above the human stratum in a great chain of being, but rather as things that transcend human knowing, exceed human finitude, and therefore invite us into an imaginative and creative life of longing and seeking. Similarly, it rejects a causal or teleological interpretation of 3:4 ("When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory") in favor of one that sees revelation happening all the time in the lives of real people at moments of profound transformation and awakening that can only be described as glorious.

A theopoetic interpretation reads the coming of the "wrath of God" (Col 3:6) brought on by "whatever in you is earthly" (3:5) and "disobedient" (3:6) not as divine punishment but as the coming of the despair and disconnection that often accompany a life of "idolatry" (3:5), one in which self (or one's own construction of reality) is perceived as ultimate and absolute. It endorses, with the author, not only gentle and honest speech (3:9)—including speech about the divine that honestly reflects our own experiences of it—but the humility and self-knowledge that precede such speech and make it possible. It asserts along with the author that the putting on of "the new self" is never a fait accompli—that "the new self is . . . being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (3:10); in other words, that our self-understanding is constantly being renewed as our understanding of the creator evolves and is renewed. And, finally, it wholeheartedly agrees that "in this renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free" (3:11)—that when our understanding of God is constantly being renewed, so too is our understanding of social divisions, distinctions, and hierarchies as false and dangerous distractions from the deeper awareness of our true nature as full and coequal participants in the body of Christ.

Clothed with Love (3:12-17)

The author addresses the community as those "chosen . . . holy and beloved" (Col 3:12), participles that evoke the story of Israel as the people of God, elected, loved, and called to be holy. With the metaphor of getting

Colossians 3:12-17

12As God's chosen ones, holy and
beloved, clothe yourselves with com-
passion, kindness, humility, meek-
ness, and patience. 13Bear with one
another and, if anyone has a complaint
against another, forgive each other;
just as the Lord has forgiven you, so
you also must forgive. 14Above all,
clothe yourselves with love, which
binds everything together in perfect
harmony. 15And let the peace of Christ
rule in your hearts, to which indeed
you were called in the one body. And
be thankful. 16Let the word of Christ
dwell in you richly; teach and admon-
ish one another in all wisdom; and with
gratitude in your hearts sing psalms,
hymns, and spiritual songs to God.
17And whatever you do, in word or
deed, do everything in the name of
the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God
the Father through him.

dressed or putting on clothes, the author names the virtuous clothing to be donned. In their dealings with one another they are to forbear and forgive. These instructions are phrased as mutual obligations. The summative phrase "above all" (3:14) stresses the putting on of love, "which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (3:14). The noun phrase σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος translates literally as "bond of perfectness." The blessing phrase "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (3:15) is better translated without the word "rule" and its connotations of ruling, reigning, and lordship. Rather, the verb is βραβευέτω, a *hapax legomenon* (a word that occurs only here in the New Testament) that means to adjudicate, judge, or discriminate, which implies a discerning function and not necessarily a dominating one. The exhortations in 3:15-17 evoke the worship and practice of the ecclesia: "giving thanks" (3:15, 17); singing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God"; teaching; and receiving "the word of Christ" (3:16). In short, "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17).

Theopoetic Reflection: Wearing Wisdom

Here, as in Col 3:1-12, we linger on the life-giving practices invoked in these verses, practices rooted in kindness, patience, forgiveness, love, gratitude, wisdom, and praise. We also note that these verses are an extension of the metaphor of clothing, the new self, and renewal introduced in 3:10. Because we are elected, loved, and called to be holy by God—and because being in such a relationship requires a constant renewal of understanding (1:10)—we behave toward others in just, kind, and compassionate ways.

Our relationship with and understanding of God determine our relationship with and understanding of others. We forgive each other because God forgives us. We are bound to each other in love because we are held together in love by the fabric of Christ. To be clothed with the new self, which is in a perpetual state of renewal, is to be inwardly discerning of Christ's presence there *and* to be outwardly open to transformation in Christ through relationship, which is to say, through the particulars of our place and time in creation. This clothing, like the body of Christ that gives it form, does not simply enable relationship, however. It *is* renewal; it *is* the discernment of the heart; it *is* relationship and response.

We imagine the faithful at Colossae understanding the "clothing" of the new self in this way—as constant watchfulness for the wisdom of Christ both within and without and as the expression (the "teach[ing]" and "admonish[ment]," 3:16) of that wisdom in a multitude of ways. We imagine the faithful at Colossae and all those who participate in the spiritual kinship of Christ not only singing songs and hymns to God but understanding themselves *as* those songs and hymns as well.

The Household Code (3:18–4:1)

From a general address to all the "holy ones," the instruction now becomes directed specifically to members with different roles and identities within the family or household: wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters. Each category of addressee is obligated to behave in a certain way toward the others, based on their social relationship and for reasons connected with their relationship with "the Lord." The pairs of relationships—wife and husband, child and father, slave and master—made up the patriarchal household of the Greco-Roman world. In that social unit the paterfamilias ruled those subordinate to him: wife, children, and slaves. In this passage, the address to slaves and to masters is the lengthiest, with the instruction to slaves receiving the most elaboration. What allows this passage to make symbolic sense is that κύριος can be translated as both "lord" and "master." Although the title "Lord" for Jesus has for many lost its association with the male father and master in an ancient household, its origin was in the order of house and empire.

Sets of moral instructions to the various members of the household are known in other exhortatory literature of the period. They routinely exhorted submission of the inferior members to the superior. Questions of interpretation of this passage revolve around how the Christian writers revised or adapted these conventional instructions in light of their faith.

Colossians 3:18–4:1

18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. 22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, 24 since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. 4:1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Those who attempt to reconstruct the historical context and situation of the community seek reasons why such instructions would be included. Perhaps they responded to a particular problem in the community or were an attempt to avoid criticism from those outside the community. Many interpreters consider whether the instructions were intended to correct specific Christian positions or self-understandings.

The symbolic element "the Lord" functions in two ways in this passage. One is as a shorthand description of the belief of the community: in the instruction to wives to submit "as is fitting in the Lord" (Col 3:18) and to children as is "your acceptable duty in the Lord" (literally "as is pleasing in the Lord," 3:20). The second is as a heavenly or ultimate counterpart to the earthly, human, and fleshly lord/master. Slaves are to "obey your earthly masters in everything," not only to please them, but "fearing the Lord" (Col 3:22). In this instruction the two masters are distinct but require the same behavior: obedience. The next elaboration urges full engagement with every task, which should be done "for the Lord and not for your masters" (3:23). The ultimate master whom the slave serves is the Lord who will give the inheritance. Masters are to treat slaves fairly because they are accountable to a lord/master in heaven. This passage projects an image of an idealized patriarchal household in which each member does her or his appropriate duty to the other, all under the overarching rule of the Lord. The expectations of submission and obedience by the subordinate members are the same as in conventional pagan household code, but the rationale is christological.

For many centuries, when the patriarchal slave-owning household was the basic social unit of Christian society, interpretation of Col 3:18–4:1 as

the word of God and as Christian teaching was straightforward. Grappling with these instructions as Scripture has become problematic and contentious as the morality of slaveholding was challenged and the legitimacy of patriarchal marriage was called into question, both on Christian grounds. Considered to be the teaching of the authoritative apostle, Paul, in enforcing a particular structure for the family and for the church, the role of this passage has been powerful and enduring.

Those who question its ongoing validity as Christian teaching employ a variety of strategies to explain, make sense of, justify, or excuse this passage. Biblical scholarship that reads biblical texts in their historical context has offered ways to understand Col 3:18–4:1 in its ancient setting. The author cites a piece of conventional moral teaching—the "household code" or "table of household duties"—in the letter to the Colossians and adapts it as Christian teaching by referencing the ultimate master, the Lord, to whom all in the household are in the end accountable. The identification of the conventional genre represented in the passage and its attribution to a pseudonymous author, rather than to Paul, serve to relativize it and make it more distant from the authoritative center of the canon. The presence of this teaching in Colossians as well as in other New Testament letters has been explained by pressure on the ecclesia from outsiders to conform to conventional family structures and by the sociological process in which charisma is routinized after the death of a leader.[3]

Feminist commentary and interpretation of Col 3:18–4:1 take seriously the history of interpretation of the text and its effects on church and family order. When the readers, writers, and recipients of this letter are assumed to be free men with autonomy and power, such injunctions to wives, children, and slaves to submit to their superiors can be read as unimportant, dismissed as conventional, or considered outdated. When the letter is received by an enslaved person, however, whose own biological family is separated and destroyed in order to create this kyriarchal family, the ethical and theological difficulty is acute.[4] From a perspective that considers the effective history of this text, historical "explanations" are not solutions to the theological and ethical problem. Even as the insti-

3. Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 17 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 186–87.

4. See Annie Tinsley, *A Postcolonial African American Re-Reading of Colossians: Identity, Reception, and Interpretation under the Gaze of Empire* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

tution of slavery is no longer acceptable and as the model of patriarchal marriage is under dispute, the text still implies that the Christ-human relationship maps upon the master-slave relationship.

In the course of our analysis, this commentary has noted the contradiction between the baptismal prayer that asserts "no slave or free" and the instructions to slaves to obey and to work to please the lord. We have observed the tension between the images of Christ as that in which "all things hold together" (1:17) and as "all and in all" (3:11) and the hierarchically structured church implied when Christ becomes "the head of the body, the church" (1:18). Colossians' use of the household code affirms that the order of the household is fitting or appropriate for the community "in the Lord" (3:18). The use of the household code form by the author of Ephesians, by elaborating on the exhortations to wives and to husbands, however, makes hierarchically structured marriage the model for the church. Feminist inquiry cannot reconcile the baptismal language of transformation with the code's language of accommodation. Disarming the rulers and authorities in the crucifixion appears to leave earthly rulers still in force.[5]

In her classic reconstruction of the history of the early ecclesia, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza posits a struggle between the egalitarian visions expressed in the baptismal prayers and the reassertion of the superordination of free over slave and of male over female in the New Testament household codes. Her reconstruction succeeds in making sense of the contradictory and ambiguous evidence in the epistles about the relations of Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and male and female.

The struggle between different visions of the church provides the basis for feminist historical reconstructions of the situation behind Colossians. To reconstruct the situation in this way requires that one imagine what the text on its surface does not allow readers to think. Among the unresolved issues that were debated in the early communities was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the ecclesia. Another was how baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection made a difference in married women's relationship with their husbands, widows' willingness to remarry, and other issues around sexual relations (1 Cor 7). Another was how baptism changed the slave/master relationship (Philemon). One was about how identity in Christ oriented the community to the

5. Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Colossians," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 314–15.

emperor (Revelation, 1 Peter). Yet another was whether the authority to witness, to teach, to baptize, and to prophesy was given through ecstatic experience, happened in worship and sacrament, or was given by office and restricted to male apostles according to particular criteria. The New Testament epistles give clues to how these debates were carried out.

One historical reconstruction of the situation behind Colossians puts together the theology of the Christ hymn and the baptismal acclamation as characteristic of those in the community and sees the household code as an attempt to stall, forestall, or preempt the implications drawn from that theology for the future of the patriarchal household, particularly the role of wives and slaves. The polemic against false teachers and their ascetic teaching and angel worship is thought to be addressed to the same people to whom the code is pointed. This reconstruction imagines the women to be singing the Christ hymn, praying the baptismal prayer, and doing ascetic practices with a different self-understanding from that constructed in the author's polemic. In earlier work I have argued that Ephesians was written as a revision of Colossians because the first letter had failed to repress interpretations of baptism that stressed the conquest of the rulers and powers in the crucifixion.[6] In rewriting Colossians, the author of Ephesians edited out the Christ hymn and the baptismal formula and rebuilt the household code to make the analogy between marriage and the church ironclad and explicit. This reconstruction was a way to account for the juxtaposition of radical/transformational Christ language and hierarchial/kyriarchal Lord language. Such historical reconstruction is provisional and open to revision. It is intended to open up possibilities for historical imagination by envisioning the ecclesia as a place of debate and conversation. Readers in a contemporary context of debate and conversation may engage with, resist, embrace, and recombine the theological possibilities and visions present in the text.

The metaphors of Colossians, explored, critiqued, and developed, can offer resources for constructive theological engagement. The charge to put away vices (Col 3:5-9) and put on virtues (3:12) envisions and offers a life of goodness that is not limited by gender. The commended virtues are not gender-specific; both women and men, wives and husbands, may embrace them. If we read the exhortation as addressed to all members of the household, then compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience are required of masters, former masters, former slaves, widows,

6. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, *Community and Authority: The Rhetoric of Obedience in the Pauline Tradition*, HTS (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

and virgins. The forbearing and forgiving in 3:13 are described as mutual and reciprocal and are not limited by station or role. The vision conjured by this passage (3:12-17) may provide a more fruitful ideal picture of life in the family or the church than the passage that follows it (3:18–4:1). The image of taking off and putting on clothes, off with old clothes (the old self) and on with new ones (new self), is intriguing. The fluidity of identity implied by the clothing metaphor may be helpful for imaging the intentional choice provoked by baptism. Certainly in different cultures, clothes distinguish women and men, but here the clothing denotes new identity in Christ where there is no longer division between Greek and Jew, Greek and barbarian. One makes a decision about what clothes to wear; here the choice is to change clothing in order to demonstrate a new creation.

The way the author of Colossians argues using "the Lord" in this influential passage about the household raises questions about the positive and negative effects of the term "Lord" attributed to Christ. "Lord" is *the* fundamental kyriarchal metaphor that summons the whole imperial system organized around the ruler and the ruled. Colossians capitalizes on this imagery by picturing how the lord/subject system below "on earth" reflects the lord/subject system above "in heaven" (Col 1:20). Traditional interpretation argues that under the dominion of the "Lord," the life of the Greco-Roman imperial household goes on as convention dictates, yet has a new motivation.[7] Nevertheless, feminist inquiry explores the power of metaphor to shape social relations. It asks how the ideal of subjection under an absolute Lord can engender and foster democratic visions of community and mutual flourishing.

7. For example, "There is no attempt to change the world and reorganize it on a new basis. Rather, there was sober recognition of the fact the Christian in his life-situation had to do what could be expected of a human being who tried to act in a morally responsible way. A completely new meaning, however, was given to these instructions, which had been adopted from contemporary culture, for their fulfillment was understood as obedience due to the Kyrios." Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia, trans. William R. Poehlman and Robert J. Karris, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 156.

Living the Code in Antebellum America

The exhortation to obedience in the household code in Col 3:18–4:1 and the claim of freedom for all who had accepted the message of the gospel in Col 3:11 present a contradiction. While Col 3:11 claims that, in a new social order, unity and equality will be experienced, Col 4:1 grants freedom only to the masters.

The contrast in the first-century letter of Paul functioned in the history of interpretation as a duplicitous message that supported the institution of slavery. Deplorable conditions of servitude began in European colonies in America and were incorporated in the United States. Slave owners in the United States relied heavily on the Colossians passage to justify their harsh treatment of slaves. For example, the pro-slavery tract *Cotton Is King* proclaims: "All the obligations of the New Testament are, indeed, placed on the same high ground. The obligation of the slave to obey his master could be placed on no higher, more sacred, no more impregnable ground."[8]

In the context of the ancient household, the message in this text places slaves in the Colossian community under the control of their masters. As it was read by the slaveholders in the American "household," the text put enslaved Africans totally in the hands of their owners. The control over slaves extended to the destruction of the families within the slave community by the practice of separation.

In America, the reality of being separated from family in the slave community was a cloud that hung over the lives of the enslaved, beginning with their capture in their homeland. The enslaved woman was made to bear a more painful form of separation than any other person in the community. She was separated from her family to attend to the children of her master. Often serving as wet-nurse to them, she was forced to deprive her own children of their rightful nourishment. The enslaved woman was separated from her teenaged children as they were sold to other plantations.

In addition to being separated from her own children, the enslaved woman as wife was separated from her husband, often to be raped by the master. She was also forced to endure the ideological and psychological separation of seeing her husband denigrated by the enslaver. Furthermore, the institution of

8. E. N. Elliott, *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright, on This Important Subject* (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott & Loomis, 1860), 352.

marriage did not apply to the enslaved. Marital unions were a convenience for the enslaver, which enabled economic stability through procreation. Slaves were breeders, and "marriages" were arranged for breeding purposes. Children were sold as soon as they were able to meet the needs of others. The enslaved woman was forced to accept degradation to her family as no free woman ever was. She was expected to accept not only her own existence as property but also the disgrace suffered by her husband and family.

The reality of separation in the enslaved families in the United States makes impossible a simple or literal reading of the injunctions of the household code in Colossians. For enslaved wives, separated from their husbands and children, obedience to master overrode obedience to husband. The obedience of children to biological "fathers" was likewise opposed to obedience of slaves to masters. Christian teaching did little to alleviate the condition of slavery in the first century. In the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries in America, the Colossians household code reinforced and supported the institution of slavery. To read Colossians in light of the practices of American slavery resists romanticized or spiritualized interpretations.

Annie Tinsley

Theopoetic Reflection: Dwelling in Tension

A theopoetic reading of Colossians remains sensitive to what the letter repeatedly affirms in spite of itself: the mystical theme that consistently pushes its way through the logical and rhetorical fissures of the text. As discussed above, the household code as expressed in Col 3:18–4:1 reinforces the patriarchal order of house and empire and inscribes by implication a parallel structure for the church. Feminist readings of Colossians cannot reconcile its theology of baptismal transformation with the code's language of accommodation. Rather than force reconciliation, we encourage readers to probe the theological possibilities and visions implied within the contradictions and inconsistencies and to initiate conversation around them.

Visioning and conversing are acts of renewal and creativity. As such, they not only begin with disorder, formlessness, disjointedness, and disharmony; they embrace these states as ontological givens in the universe.[9]

9. Catherine Keller elaborates this view of creativity in her redemptive reading of Genesis 1. See Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), esp. chapters 1 and 11.

Creative engagement with our holy texts also requires a shift in our understanding of difference and discrepancy, to see them not as signs of imperfection or fallenness but as features of the created medium in which humans move, reflect, discern, and grow. Understanding difference in this way pushes us to acknowledge and practice forms of knowing (the poetic, the paradoxical, the parabolic, the contemplative, the affective) that exceed and sometimes challenge rational, propositional ways of knowing. It urges us to hold many things, if not all things, together at once.

From within such a perspective, the letter to Colossians does, in fact, cohere. It resolves into a microcosm of the human condition, one that asks us both to perceive its irreconcilable aspects, to hold them all together in the hands of Christ that are our own, to speak about them in unifying tones, and to act in response to them in ways we discern to be just and true. From this perspective, the letter to Colossians, including 3:18–4:1, asks of us what our own lives ask: not only that we dwell in tension, but that we make choices and take actions that bring life out of it. We are asked to accommodate others, in love, for their own and our own well-being. We are asked to live out an inherited order—one to which we commit ourselves in our vows, promises, and contracts—for the health of the family or community. We are sometimes asked to make provisional our own needs and hierarchies to make room for the needs of others. Often, on the spiritual path, we ask ourselves to lose ourselves so that we may find ourselves in God. We know from experience that imagining and working toward the vision of human flourishing will always take place in a context of sacrifice, loss, and death—not only of people and things we hold dear, but also of the expectations, ambitions, and addictions we may hold even dearer. We remember too that both individuals and institutions are prone to the kinds of clinging we are asked in 3:18–4:1 to rehabilitate, and we encourage conversation on both these levels.

An effective feminist and theopoetic response to Col 3 does not reject its call to locate our true center in something other than the "old self" and its ways. Nor, on the other hand, does it regard this call to self-sacrifice as compulsory for some individuals and groups (women, children, and slaves) and voluntary for others (lords and masters). It views the household code as one portion of a larger text that consistently locates transformation in a mystical understanding of Christ in all things. To stay true to this understanding of Christ is to allow Col 3 to fertilize our desire to love and serve while also teaching, preaching, and speaking its insufficiency as a model for the church.

Colossians 4:2-18

Further Exhortations and Greetings

Further Exhortations (4:2-6)

The exhortation concludes with encouragement to prayer, reiterating the motifs of prayer introduced in the opening verses of the letter (Col 1:12) and of thanksgiving from the opening verses (1:9) and from the passage preceding the instructions to wives (3:17). In Col 4:2-3, when he asks the addressees to pray for him, the author reintroduces the person of Paul and his high apostolic mission to "declare the mystery of Christ, . . . so that I may reveal it clearly." The expression "open to us a door for the word" (4:3) also occurs in 1 Cor 16:9 and 2 Cor 2:12 and refers to the mission to spread the Gospel. Here, the author refers explicitly to his imprisonment for the first time in the letter, although his discussion of his sufferings in 1:24 may be an indirect way of talking about his being in prison. Paul's purpose is to "reveal . . . clearly" the mystery (4:3).

The mention of mission leads to the instruction to interact "wisely toward outsiders" (4:5), to take advantage of the time, and to speak with gracious and pleasing speech. Speech "seasoned with salt" invokes Plutarch's comparison of clever speech with seasoned food.[1] The phrase

1. Plutarch: "For wit is probably the tastiest condiment of all. Therefore some call it 'graciousness' because it makes the necessary chore of eating pleasant." *Mor.*, 514E–F; cited in Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia, trans. William R. Poehlman and Robert J. Karris, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 168; and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SP 17 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 173.

Colossians 4:2-6

[2]Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. [3]At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, [4]so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

[5]Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. [6]Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

"conduct yourselves" (4:5) translates the verb περιπατέω, also used in 2:6 to describe the orientation to life recommended by the letter. The reference to "gracious" (4:6) dealing with those outside has led some scholars to conclude or propose that the behavior of the members of the Colossian church was causing disruption and conflict with the surrounding culture, and this instruction was meant to improve relationships.[2] This scenario may be the result of reading Colossians through the lens of the situation implied by 1 Peter. We can imagine Christian women speaking with outsiders with salty speech. Although not named in Colossians, these women who speak could be those like Phoebe, Junia, and Prisca, leaders in early Christian missionary movement, named in the letter to the Romans (Rom 16:1-7).

Mutual Greetings (4:7-18)

The author promises that news about himself will be shared by two named individuals, Tychicus and Onesimus (Col 4:7, 9). Tychicus (Acts 20:4; Eph 6:21; 2 Tim 4:12; Titus 3:12) is described with three epithets that emphasize his connection with Paul: "he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant" (Col 4:7). The purpose of his being sent is "to encourage your hearts" (4:8)—the same activity Paul undertakes in 2:2. Accompanying him is Onesimus, also a "faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (4:9). They are conduits of information about "everything here"; they bind the letter's recipients to Paul. Six additional coworkers are said to greet the congregation: Aristarchus, described as "my fellow prisoner" (4:10; see also Phlm 24; Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2), Mark (Col 4:10; see also Acts 5:37, 39; 12:12, 25; 13:13), and Jesus, called Justus (Col 4:11). The writer includes specific details about each and explains that they are Jews, "ones of the circumcision" (4:11). Epaphras, "a ser-

2. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 176.

Colossians 4:7-18

7 Tychicus will tell you all the news
about me; he is a beloved brother, a
faithful minister, and a fellow servant
in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you
for this very purpose, so that you may
know how we are and that he may en-
courage your hearts; 9 he is coming with
Onesimus, the faithful and beloved
brother, who is one of you. They will
tell you about everything here.

10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner
greets you, as does Mark the cousin of
Barnabas, concerning whom you have
received instructions—if he comes to
you, welcome him. 11 And Jesus who is
called Justus greets you. These are the
only ones of the circumcision among
my co-workers for the kingdom of God,
and they have been a comfort to me.
12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a ser-
vant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is
always wrestling in his prayers on your
behalf, so that you may stand mature
and fully assured in everything that God
wills. 13 For I testify for him that he has
worked hard for you and for those in
Laodicea and in Hierapolis. 14 Luke, the
beloved physician, and Demas greet
you. 15 Give my greetings to the broth-
ers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nym-
pha and the church in her house. 16 And
when this letter has been read among
you, have it read also in the church of
the Laodiceans; and see that you read
also the letter from Laodicea. 17 And say
to Archippus, "See that you complete the
task that you have received in the Lord."

18 I, Paul, write this greeting with
my own hand. Remember my chains.
Grace be with you.

vant of Christ Jesus," greets them, and, like Tychicus, fulfills the same function as Paul does, "wrestling in his prayers on your behalf" (4:12; see also 1:7). The author testifies to his hard work. Luke and Demas also send greetings, and this is the only New Testament reference to Luke that describes him as a "beloved physician" (4:14).

Unlike Romans, in which those receiving the greetings are named first, here the author speaks first of the greeters, followed by those greeted. Those sisters and brothers in Laodicea and Nympha and the church in her house are named as those to be greeted (Col 4:15). The author makes reference to the letter being read first in Colossae and then in Laodicea and indicates that the one from Laodicea also be read in Colossae. This verse gives an intriguing glimpse into the authority and value of the letters of Paul in this time period. Not only is a local letter to be read in a place nearby, but another letter intended for others is to be read as well. A specific and personal-sounding message is given via the Colossian letter to Archippus: "See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord" (4:17). This message may be intended to give a sense of immediacy and credibility to the author.

Historical-critical questions about these greetings are tied up with the question of the authorship of the letter and the relationship of the individuals named to those in Acts and other letters, particularly Philemon. Some scholars construct historical scenarios to account for the overlap of names. For example, they claim that Philemon and Onesimus were from Colossae and that Philemon was the head of the church there. James D. G. Dunn argues that Colossians was written by Timothy but approved by Paul while in prison.[3] Margaret Y. MacDonald proposes that one of Paul's students composed Colossians using the letter to Philemon as a model.[4] Those who see Colossians as participating in the process of extending and developing Paul's authoritative theologizing understand the names to serve a rhetorical function, reinforcing the authority of these coworkers by emphasizing their status and close identification with the writer, Paul.

Ancient letters were often dictated to a secretary and then signed by the author. In the conclusion of the letter to the Colossians, the author claims a Pauline autograph: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand" (Col 4:18). For those who support the authenticity of Colossians, this statement is evidence of Pauline authorship. For those who argue for its "deutero-Pauline" status, the statement is seen as an attempt to strengthen the appearance of Pauline authorship. A third reference (see also 4:3, 10) to his imprisonment is made, ending with a traditional greeting of "grace."

Feminist reconstruction reflects on the role of coworkers in the ministry of Paul and works against the dominant tradition of interpretation that sees Paul as the singular apostle. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes "the early Christian missionary movement" to emphasize that the enterprise involved many others besides Paul.[5] In the greetings in Colossians, the names of the male coworkers predominate. The manuscript tradition, dubious about the female leader of the house church, amended the text to Nymphas, a male name. The apparent contradiction between her leadership in the community and the address to wives to submission in Col 3:18 is often explained by the hypothesis that Nympha is a widow. No male is mentioned in connection with her. This explanation reads the house-

3. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 269.

4. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 7–8.

5. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 160.

hold code instructions simply as an accurate description of the house church rather than as an ideal or an attempt to address households that did not conform to that ideal. The record of Nympha nourishes feminist historical reconstruction and encourages us to imagine Nympha hearing the letter, reading the letter, or hosting the meal where it was read. The stress in the final greetings on communication back and forth between Paul's location and the addressees, the affirmation of interdependent relationships among leaders, and the motif of mutual prayer contribute to a vision of a discipleship of equals, the ideal of Christian identity.

Theopoetic Reflection: Meaning on the Way

Colossians 4:1 is emblematic of the rhetorical tension we have attempted to highlight in Col 3 and throughout the letter. In this verse, the author reinforces the social-patriarchal code with an injunction to masters to treat their slaves justly—an injunction built on the assumption that masters and slaves are a part of the natural order. Both the assumption and the injunction rest on the understanding of God as supreme Master: treat your slaves justly, masters, "*for you know* that you also have a Master in heaven" (4:1). The household code, and the Christian way in general, echo in the temporal sphere of the divine order as understood by the author.

A central claim of this commentary, however, is that the divine order can be variously understood and that it is the conversation (rather than the author's claims or solutions), the relational interplay between people who hold various understandings, that not only makes this text holy but also constitutes the emergence and dynamism of the *basileia* itself. The very existence of the letter suggests that various practices and metaphors were being used to express and extend a person's or a community's experience of God. The corrective thrust of the letter reveals the author's concern that unified understandings be formulated, which in turn points to the flourishing of diverse understandings and articulations, a phenomenon consistent with the work of the Spirit as described in Acts 2.

Although the survival and canonization of the letter have created the long-standing impression that the author's literal claims are divinely privileged, we understand the letter's value as Scripture differently. As the partial record of a conversation among people groping toward a radically new understanding of God, Colossians may be read as an affirmation of the meaning-making process itself and an invitation to extend it. In such a reading, the letter's ironies and contradictions as well as its

larger conversational context are seen as marks of the infinite profusion of God-meaning in the world and in human relationship. They provide a less precise and conclusive but more freeing, vibrant, and challenging roadmap for the Christian way. They also, we believe, provide an invitation to read and interpret the letter itself—and all of Scripture—in ways that resist closure and encourage agile and creative response.

Such a reading begins with a good-faith encounter with the literal text and moves from there into metaphorical play as opportunities for such movement arise. This type of reading requires vigilance, imaginative engagement, and a willingness to take risks. It aligns fully with the invitation in Col 4:2 to "devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving." In a prayerful encounter with Scripture, as in prayer itself, a person remains alert and open to irruptions of new meaning or insight and gives thanks for his or her human ability to do so. Such a reading also prays, along with the author, that "God will open to us a door for the word" (4:3) and assumes that multiple and perhaps infinite doors exist for every reader of Scripture. A reading like this would notice the author's claim of imprisonment in 4:3 and accept that this claim carries some measure of literal truth (either in reference to the author or to Paul in whose name he writes). It might then consider—"open a door to"—the metaphorical implications of the author's imprisonment. The reader might notice that the author seems locked within Greco-Roman understandings of the household and of proper conduct, or one might notice how the author advances a closed, zero-sum system of meaning and practice (rescue and transfer, captivity in Christ, the nailing of debts to a cross, the disarming of rulers and authorities) even as he strives to declare the "mystery" of Christ. Finally, the reader might identify or pray for understanding about the forms of captivity and imprisonment that create blind spots and contradictions in our own faith lives and in those of our communities and ask for guidance in renewing and transforming them.

The reference in Col 4:5 to "outsiders" reinforces the image of Paul and of Christians existing in a place apart—a place of voluntary captivity?—and implies the need for gatekeepers both to manage public relations and to monitor internal relations. The litany of greeters and gatekeepers in 4:7-17 strengthens the image of the church as separate, missional, and hierarchical. But the naming of names and roles in these verses also gives us a way to imagine the early church as a body of individuals, like ourselves, male and female alike, who minister, serve, have a purpose, care about the well-being of others, encourage one another's hearts, travel together, are

faithful to one another, are beloved of one another, belong to one another, share news of one another, and greet, teach, welcome, comfort, and pray for one another (4:7-11). It also helps us know that our early Christian sisters and brothers worked hard (4:13), opened the doors of their homes (4:15), circulated the good news (4:16), and, like us, were concerned with being productive and completing tasks (4:17). When read mindfully, this litany of names and roles helps us perceive a central task of our own as readers of Scripture: to exercise the imagination in order to nurture spiritual kinship with our brothers and sisters across time.

Indeed, the letter's closing reminder to Archippus to "complete the task" he has "received in the Lord" (Col 4:17) punctuates the entire letter and serves as a concluding reminder to the Colossians—and to us—of the importance of tasks themselves. The reminder echoes the injunction to slaves in 3:23 to "put yourselves into [your task, whatever it is], as done for the Lord," and also resonates with the mission of the author himself—the making known of the word of God on behalf of Christ. In a letter whose major themes involve practices, missions, and tasks, the closing reminder to Archippus seems to beg a question—the same question that arises out of the letter's theological and metaphorical tensions. What task or action does the grace of baptism and the mystery of Christ in all things require not just of readers of this letter but of Christians?

A task, by nature, is a discrete and earthy endeavor. It is done by a body with tools in a given time and place, with a clear and usually immediate goal. Every task also involves a measure of resistance to the tangible and intangible forces that make up its context; this is what "work" is.[6] A person's life—day in, day out—could be said to consist of a long series of tasks that shape one's immediate environment and, simultaneously, the contours of one's identity. The author recommends that Christians, however, perform tasks in a particular way and with a particular identity in mind: in and for the Lord (Col 3:23; 4:17). Doing a task "for the Lord" is commonly understood as doing a task "with the Lord in mind" or "with a mental dedication of the task to the Lord." In the context of a letter that claims we exist and participate in the cosmic medium of Christ, however, we hear in this injunction a call to remember our Christic identity and to act, to complete tasks, on behalf of the Christ in whom our true selves rest.

6. See M. C. Richards, "Ordeal by Fire: Evolution of Person," in *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person,* 2nd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 130–48.

Such remembrance may be the most important task of all, the dilating gesture that invites the discernment of Christ into our work and helps us know, over time, if our work is life giving. Once we accept the responsibility of this remembrance, social hierarchies and institutional injunctions become irrelevant; one might find that one's task brings joy and strengthens relationship either within or without social or ecclesial structures. One may grow ever more keenly aware that the tasks we receive in the Lord (Col 4:17) are various and unique (1 Cor 12:4-11). The task of the feminist biblical historian is different from that of the first-century slave, for example; and the task of the modern reader of Colossians is different from that of early readers. But if we imagine each of our tasks as held in Christ and as a hymn to Christ (rather than, say, a payment or offering to Christ), the tenor and tone of that task will change. It will become a proclamation of the gospel, a unique expression of the word that we are.

The conversation that can emerge today from such a shift in perception contains space for every woman—in fact, every individual—to experience and express God differently. Indeed, the compassionate exchange of competing ideas about texts and the doctrines that arise from them may be the task of our time. We begin this work here with the letter to Colossians as we hold it, listen to it, speak to it, and also press it, nudge it, and shape it. When acts of creative interpretation or meaning-making transpire in a spirit of humility, with an understanding that new meanings and practices are always on the way—as the letter to the Colossians demonstrates they were in the mid-to-late first century—we both honor this letter and break it open, letting its profusion of images and ideas spill into our midst and baptize us into the mystery and totality of Christ anew.

Author's Introduction to Philemon

Philemon and Human Bodies

When I mentioned to another biblical scholar that I was writing about Paul's letter to Philemon, his immediate response was to smile sympathetically and say "too bad." He then explained that he had reacted this way because the letter lacked any theology. Such a comment reminded me of Demetrius K. Williams's observation that in the ancient church, interpreters dismissed this short letter, calling it "trivial, insignificant, banal, [and] unspiritual."[1] Some early Christians questioned Pauline authorship of the letter or, even if it was deemed to have been written by the apostle, judged that it contained very little of an edifying nature.[2] A few communities rejected the letter from the canon altogether.[3] It is true that Philemon does not reflect an elaborate

1. Demetrius K. Williams, "'No Longer as a Slave': Reading the Interpretation History of Paul's Epistle to Philemon," in *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, ed. Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 11.

2. This is some of the information with which Jerome supplies us. See *St. Jerome's Commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon,* trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 352.

3. For example, the Syrian church claimed the letter was spurious and did not use it. See Williams, "No Longer as a Slave," in Johnson, Noel, and Williams, *Onesimus Our Brother*, 16.

theological argument, but it is hardly dull and insignificant. The document's twenty-five verses have had a tremendous impact on countless people's lives through the ages; exercising "an influence inconsistent with the importance that biblical scholars have accorded it."[4] The social and ethical questions that arise from Philemon are as weighty as theological topics, and one might argue that they have had every bit as great a bearing on the history of Christianity and history itself as some of the more "theological" texts emerging from the literature of the early church.

Conscious of Paul's Views on Slavery

The Letter of Philemon, probably due to its length and content, is usually dismissed as trivial and insignificant. One who looks for an elaborate theology would be disappointed in reading Philemon. But as Alicia Batten has rightly observed, the "social and ethical questions that arise from Philemon are as weighty as theological topics" because of its "tremendous impact on countless people's lives through the ages." A feminist would be pleasantly surprised that the letter names a woman among its addressees but would also be shocked or angered to discover a local church leader who is a slave owner. Hence, the importance of Philemon really depends on the attitude of its readers, which, of course, depends on their interests.

It might be puzzling that a Christian document that deals with slavery is not popular among churches in Asia or in the Philippines in particular where slavery, including its contemporary forms, persists. Compared to the United States and England, this region rarely hears the Letter to Philemon preached or debated in churches. While many Filipino Christians revere Paul as a zealous missionary, nobody seems to bother with what he thinks about slavery. This does not mean that slavery is not a social or ecclesial issue among Filipinos. The most probable reason is that the Bible did not really play an important role in awakening the Filipino consciousness regarding slavery. Like many peoples subjected to slavery, the awakening of the consciousness regarding this cruel and inhumane institution came by experience. During the Spanish and American colonization of the Philippines (from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries), the enslaved natives resisted their

4. Sara C. Winter, "Philemon," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 301.

colonial masters and local elite collaborators not as a result of reading the Bible but because they became aware of their own dispossession and oppression.[5]

As a Filipino Christian woman reader of Philemon, I am attentive to the fact that my own reading is shaped by my identity of belonging to a people on whom slavery has been etched in memory, including the role played by the church as both oppressor and defender of the oppressed. I am convinced that a transformed consciousness is key to ending slavery and that challenging biblical readings that support exploitation and oppression of peoples is crucial to this entire process of conscientization.

Carolina C. Dionco

The letter names a woman, Apphia, once (Phlm 1). In fact, this is the only letter in the New Testament that explicitly identifies a woman among its addressees. The reference requires attention not only because this commentary series takes a feminist approach but because Apphia is one of the people to whom the letter is addressed, along with Philemon and Archippus. Many scholars have assumed that Apphia is married to Philemon, yet she is never identified as his wife, but simply as Ἀπφίᾳ τῇ ἀδελφῇ, "Apphia our sister" (v. 2). It is not out of the question that Apphia could be married to Philemon, but the *presumption* that she is his spouse has contributed to the notion that Paul wrote to a house church with Philemon at the head, Apphia by his side, and, as some have posited, Archippus their grown son or perhaps another associate in their household as well.[6] This commentary does not begin with these assumptions, for it is not obvious that Apphia is married to Philemon or is the mistress of the household or that Paul wrote to a household in the first place. Perhaps he simply wrote to some church leaders, among whom Apphia was one.

There are many other aspects of the letter pertinent to a feminist approach, especially when one considers Mary Ann Beavis's observation that feminist commentaries need to engage in the "critique of biblical passages and interpretations that have been used to limit or oppress

5. For a thorough study of Philippine history that focuses on Filipino anti-colonial struggle and subsequent transformation of consciousness, see Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited* (Manila: Tala Publishing Services, 1975).

6. Winter, "Philemon," in Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures*, 309.

women and other marginalized people."[7] As Sabine Bieberstein has written, the "oppression of women is not to be separated from various other forms of oppression."[8] Philemon figured centrally in arguments justifying the institution of slavery in a variety of contexts, as well as what to do when a slave flees his or her owner. It has been employed both to endorse and sustain the horrendous suffering of people but also to support their liberation. A study of Philemon demands some attention to how the letter has been used throughout the centuries to oppress not only women but also hundreds of thousands of people. In addition, engagement is also needed with what its original intentions may have been, even though they remain contested and somewhat enigmatic.

Interpretive Debates: A Sample

There are many examples of disagreements about this letter, both regarding the scenario that forms its background, as well as how it should be interpreted and applied. The former has often shaped or at the very least influenced the latter. For centuries, the "runaway slave" hypothesis dominated commentary on Philemon. The letter was presumed to have emerged from a backdrop in which Onesimus, the household slave, had wronged his master Philemon in some way and subsequently fled from Philemon's house. In part, the notion that Paul was writing to a household, as briefly addressed above, contributed to this runaway slave hypothesis. The fugitive Onesimus had met and been baptized by the imprisoned Paul who thus writes to Philemon, asking him to forgive his household slave but *not* to set him free. This view can be traced back *at least* as early as the writings of the late fourth-century Christian theologian John Chrysostom, who prefaced his homilies on Philemon with a description of the overall argument of the letter.[9]

According to Allen Dwight Callahan, Chrysostom is presenting a novel interpretation of the text and attempting to underscore the value of

7. Mary Ann Beavis, "Report on Wisdom Commentary Hebrews Volume" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Baltimore, MD, November, 2013), 1.

8. Sabine Bieberstein, "Philemon: A Reading under Apphia's Critical Eyes," in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 848.

9. PG 62, 699.

Philemon in the face of general neglect by other early Christian writers,[10] presumably those who considered it to be "banal" and "unspiritual." Chrysostom's interpretation stresses that Paul is not liberating the slave, and he uses his reading of the letter to argue strongly that the Christian church should not be challenging the institution of slavery, a challenge that some Christians were apparently waging.[11] Callahan, however, seriously questions Chrysostom's presentation of the background scenario, a scenario that became "the traditional view," and instead puts forward a different proposal about the document. He argues that Onesimus was not Philemon's slave but his biological brother. Paul was writing to heal a rift between the two men and convince Philemon to receive Onesimus not only as his brother but as a "beloved brother" (Phlm 16).[12]

On the other hand, Margaret M. Mitchell has probed whether or not Chrysostom's interpretation of the scenario behind the letter was new, both on the basis of a close reading of Chrysostom's text as well as attention to the works of other early Christians writing prior to or possibly at the same time as him, such as the works of Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, and Ambrosiaster, as well as the Marcionite prologues to the Pauline epistles and the *Apostolic Constitutions*.[13] Mitchell also points out that some of Chrysostom's contemporaries in both the East and the West shared his assumption that Onesimus was Philemon's slave. She therefore concludes that the fugitive slave hypothesis is indeed ancient and predates Chrysostom, although, as she adds, "demonstrating the antiquity of the traditional reading . . . does not constitute definitive proof of its accuracy."[14] Callahan could be correct about the story that lies behind Philemon, but at least by the fourth century some Christians had adopted the fugitive slave hypothesis.

In response to Mitchell, Callahan has clarified that evidence for the runaway slave scenario does not clearly predate Chrysostom, with the exception of Athanasius, because the various writers on whom Mitchell relies are contemporaries of Chrysostom or were possibly writing after

10. Allen Dwight Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon*, The New Testament in Context (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 13–14. See also, Allen Dwight Callahan, "Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative *Argumentum*," *HTR* 86 (1993): 357–76.

11. Callahan, *Embassy*, 14–15.

12. Callahan, "Paul's Epistle," 372.

13. Margaret M. Mitchell, "John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look," *HTR* 88 (1995): 135–48.

14. Mitchell, "John Chrysostom," 147.

him. Moreover, Athanasius simply refers to Onesimus as a δοῦλον ("slave"), which does not mean that Athanasius necessarily accepts the entire runaway slave hypothesis. The reference is solitary and "hardly constitutes a broad consensus"[15] in Callahan's view.

Callahan's theory about Philemon has not been widely accepted, but I include the discussion here as an illustration of how what one argues or presumes to be the historical context has an impact on how the letter is interpreted and applied in many instances. The presumption that the fugitive slave hypothesis is historically true enabled many who upheld the institution of slavery, including Chrysostom, to argue that it was biblically condoned, even if they advocated for the humane treatment of slaves, as Chrysostom did.[16] Despite the occasional questioning of slavery by Christians through the centuries, the forced enslavement of some persons to others was taken for granted and promoted by the church. Interpretations of Philemon assisted in this promotion. Theologians and leaders such as Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo "were providing even more robust defenses of the idea of slavery than non-Christian philosophers had done before them."[17] Medieval writers, including, for example, Thomas Aquinas, in no way doubted the master-slave relationship and read the letter as illustrative of how masters and slaves should treat one another.[18] John Calvin interpreted the text to mean that Paul was returning Onesimus to his rightful owner and that the legal rights to property, including slaves as property, should be upheld. Akin to many earlier exegetes, Calvin appealed to the Joseph typology (Gen 45:5) when he reflected upon verse 15 of Philemon. The reformer understood Paul to be suggesting that Onesimus's flight from Philemon, was, in the end, for the good. Here Calvin states that as in the case of Joseph, "a joyful result may be regarded as a remedy for evils, which is held out to us by the hand of God for blotting out offenses."[19] Likewise

15. Allen Dwight Callahan, "John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Response to Margaret Mitchell," *HTR* 88 (1995): 151.

16. See PG 62, 157, and Callahan, "John Chrysostom," 156.

17. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 116.

18. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaries on St. Paul's Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. Chrysostom Baer, O. Praem (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2007), 197.

19. John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: 2 Corinthians and Timothy, Titus, & Philemon*, vol. 10, trans. T. A. Smail, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 398.

Martin Luther read the letter as upholding the legal right to property, including the possession of slaves as property.[20]

Despite the persistence of this particular interpretation of Philemon and other biblical texts that were read in support of slavery, by the late eighteenth century serious and sustained debates about slavery had emerged in various parts of the world. In 1807, the British parliament finally abolished the slave trade throughout the British Empire, but it was not until 1833 that slavery was abolished in England and all of the British territories. In the United States, Paul's letters, and in particular Philemon, were among the most debated New Testament books in the antebellum period.[21] In 1846, a Presbyterian minister named Albert Barnes published a book that rejected pro-slavery uses of the Bible and incorporated discussions of what it meant to be called a "slave" or δοῦλος in the ancient world. Of Paul's letter to Philemon, Barnes wrote,

> There is no positive or certain evidence that Onesimus was a slave at all. . . . *[A]ll* the proof that there can be on that point must be derived from ver. 16, and *all* the evidence in that verse is in the fact that he is there called "*a servant*"—δοῦλος. . . . The word denotes servant of any kind, and it should never be assumed that those to whom it was applied were slaves. . . . There is not the least evidence that Paul used any force, or even persuasion, to induce Onesimus to return to Philemon.[22]

Others argued that the slave language was metaphorical but that the reference to Onesimus as a "brother" and "in the flesh" (Phlm 16) meant that he was the biological brother of Philemon, an interpretation that anticipates Callahan's arguments, discussed earlier.[23] Thus it is clear that not all concurred with what had been the traditional interpretation of the letter.

Many other church leaders used Philemon and other texts in the Pauline corpus, however, to argue for the preservation and promotion of slavery, which, in their view, was biblically sanctioned. The notion that Paul was sending the slave, Onesimus, back to his master, Philemon, was appealed

20. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Lectures on Titus, Philemon and Hebrews*, vol. 29, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1968), 100.

21. Robert Paul Seesengood, *Paul. A Brief History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 180.

22. Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Perkins and Purvis, 1846), 321–23. Barnes is cited in Claudia Setzer and David A. Shefferman, eds., *The Bible and American Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 111.

23. Seesengood, *Paul*, 180.

to in defense of the Fugitive Slave Act, passed in 1850.[24] The arguments of abolitionists who presented different interpretations of Philemon and other biblical texts that refer to slavery were vociferously disputed by a variety of legal, religious, and academic leaders.[25] Even some who personally disagreed with slavery, such as Professor Moses Stuart, still thought that a close reading of Philemon in the Greek led to the conclusion that the letter to Philemon "tacitly endorsed slavery."[26] Still others, such as Harriett Beecher Stowe, who was outraged by slavery, deemed that indeed, if the Bible supported slavery, then the Bible itself must be immoral.[27]

To my mind, a very compelling example of this controversy appears in an account provided by a circuit riding evangelist, Charles Colcock Jones, who in 1833 preached to a slave congregation. His account is worth citing in full:

> I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle to Philemon: and when I insisted on fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants, and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one-half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves; and those who remained looked anything but satisfied with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismission, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared that there was no such Epistle in the Bible; others, that it was not the Gospel; others, that I preached to please the masters; others, that they did not care if they never heard me preach again! . . . There were some too, who had strong objections against me as a Preacher, because I was a *master*, and said, "his people have to work as well as we."[28]

Here is an instance in which some members of the congregation were willing to declare the letter as either nonbiblical or not true to the gospel based on Jones's traditional interpretation of it. As James W. Perkinson

24. Robert Atkins, "Contextual Interpretation of the Letter to Philemon in the United States," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, ed. D. Francois Tolmie, BZNW 169 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 214.

25. See E. N. Elliott, ed., *Cotton Is King and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe and Cartwright, on This Important Subject* (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott and Loomis, 1860).

26. Seesengood, *Paul*, 179. See Moses Stuart, *Conscience and the Constitution* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1850).

27. Ibid., 181. See Harriett Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1854).

28. Charles Colcock Jones, who is cited in James W. Perkinson, "Enslaved by the Text: The Uses of Philemon," in Johnson, Noel, and Williams, *Onesimus Our Brother*, 124. Perkinson cites from Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 294.

points out, these slaves were presumably illiterate: "Their exegesis involves only what their own bodies tell them of truth."[29] They did not need to engage in biblical exegesis in order to refute the text but were willing to reject it using "corporeal knowledge" that "trumps an assumed literacy of the page."[30]

Perhaps the above example illustrates most plainly why attention to Philemon is so important. People "felt" the impact of the interpretation of this letter on their bodies in the forms of confinement, beatings, and whippings, among other horrors. Thinking about embodiment and how texts can be employed to categorize, define, inflict pain upon, or even dismiss human bodies is an important dimension of feminist interpretation. Anne Golomb Hoffman has written that "as a form of resistance to detached abstractions or universalizing trends that erase differences and disembody utterances, an insistence on embodiment can be considered a major and lasting contribution of feminist theory that alters reading practices and our understanding of texts."[31]

For centuries, the letter to Philemon was used to reinforce the physical and mental suffering, servitude, and despair of massive numbers of human beings. Readings of Philemon have not been purely academic or theological exercises but have figured centrally in questions of life and death. A feminist interpretation of such a text must take the bodies of the characters in the letter very seriously, as well as the impact of the letter on subsequent human bodies, regardless of their gender.

An African American Pastor's Reconciliation with Philemon

History has bequeathed to posterity the ruminations of elite, educated, and admittedly gifted interpreters who sought to understand the meaning and purpose of Philemon for their own social-political and ecclesial contexts—Chrysostom, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Jerome, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Joseph B. Lightfoot, and others. It is unfortunate perhaps that ancient history has not left to modern readers and interpreters a response to Philemon from those in antiquity who were affected and impacted by its interpretation. One can

29. Perkinson, "Enslaved," in Johnson, Noel, and Williams, *Onesimus Our Brother*, 125.
30. Ibid., 125.
31. Anne Golomb Hoffman, "Embodiments: An Introduction," *Prooftexts* 20 (2000): 2.

only speculate on Onesimus' own feelings or wishes since slaves have no autonomy or say in their destinies; they must keep silence. However, the quote above from the Presbyterian plantation missionary, Charles Colcock Jones, recounting the responsive aftermath of a sermon on Philemon that he preached before an enslaved African American congregation in 1833 can perhaps be instructive in this regard.

To be sure, enslaved African Americans, who were recipients of the long effects of Philemon's interpretive history, did provide a visceral response to this epistle in particular. Their palpable discontent with its use is expressed emphatically in their refusal to accept its presumed views about their own social-political situation. With openly expressed dissatisfaction, as Jones recalls, "one-half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked anything but satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine."[32] The enslaved hearers did not speak immediately, but they innately recognized the complicity of the text and its interpretation with the slaveholding system. But eventually they did speak, and the epistle was even rejected: "Some solemnly declared," says Jones, "'that there was no such Epistle in the Bible.'"[33] Rejected also was the preacher and his exposition of Philemon: "There were some too, who had strong objections against me as a Preacher" whose complicity with slavery was clear to the audience "because I was a master, and [they] said, 'his people have to work as well as we.'"[34] The African American audience thus found Philemon and its interpretation incompatible with their own experience with God and the Scriptures.

This illustrative response to Philemon represents a tradition of rejection or at best a very cold reception of this epistle that continued in the ecclesiastical traditions of many African American churches. My own experience in the Black Baptist Church since I was a child and now as a pastor confirms that of Allen Callahan's in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Paul's letter to Philemon was not a part of the "canon" for many African American churches by virtue of its absence and exclusion from sermons, Sunday school curricula, and Bible Class teaching.[35] In short, this letter played no essential role

32. Perkinson, "Enslaved," in Johnson, Noel, and Williams, *Onesimus Our Brother*, 124.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Callahan, *Embassy*, 1–4.

in their religious tradition and ecclesiastical life, most certainly because of the role it had played in supporting Fugitive Slave Law and, perhaps even more emphatically, the role it played in endorsing slavery more generally.

This is why, for me, Callahan's alternative occasion for the letter is compelling for many African American pastors and preachers. In short, Callahan argues not only that slavery is an inappropriate background for reading Philemon but also that Onesimus is not a slave; he is the blood brother of Philemon. Paul's letter does not offer a plea to a master on behalf of a runaway slave but provides an apostolic intervention between two estranged brothers. In my own research and writing on Philemon,[36] Phlm 16 is a critical verse for many readings and historical reconstructions of Philemon. Thus Callahan stakes his claim for a rereading of Philemon based on this verse. Although his alternative *argumentum* builds also on antebellum abolitionists' exegeses of Phlm 16 during the heated debate over human freedom or human servitude, he elaborated the full exegetical and possible/plausible historical implications of such a proposal. He notes interestingly that in traditional exegesis of Phlm 16 there is a certain unquestioned assumption: Onesimus is identified *literally as a slave* and *figuratively as a brother*. He reverses this assumption: for him Onesimus is *literally* Philemon's *blood brother* and *figuratively* identified as a slave. He thus attempts to sort out Paul's rhetoric in this letter because Phlm 16 is the only verse in the letter where the term δοῦλος ("slave") is used and notes that Onesimus's servile identity rests solely on the exegesis of this word in traditional exegesis of Philemon. But since Paul can use the term "slave" for himself and his coworkers in a figurative sense (Phil 1:1; Rom 1:1), might not the possibility obtain here also?

It is this possibility that opens the opportunity for Paul's Letter to Philemon not only to "speak" again to the African American Christian religious tradition but to speak with a positive message. As I mentioned above, in my experience (and that of multiple others) in the black church, Philemon plays no liturgical role. I have never heard the letter used as a text for preaching or teaching. Inspired by this alternative

36. Demetrius K. Williams, "African American Approaches: Re-humanizing the Reader against Racism and Reading Through Experience" in *Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 155–73.

argumentum of Philemon from the beginning when Callahan shared it with me as a fellow doctoral student in the early drafts of his 1993 *HTR* article, I finally took the epistle of Phlm 15-16 as my text for a sermon.

Here is an excerpt of what I preached for Family and Friends Day at the Community Baptist Church of Greater Milwaukee in September 2009, where I serve as pastor.

> Today is "Family and Friends Day." We join together to remember the struggles and strains, but also to celebrate the joys and kindred bonds of family life. In this regard, I'd like to preach from the subject, "Family Matters." . . . The first thing we might observe is that the phrase itself ("family matters") invites us to consider its dual meaning, or shall I say its *double entendre*—that is, "a word or expression capable of two meanings or interpretations." On the one hand, the phrase "family matters" can refer to those matters or concerns that are related to family life. . . . On the other hand, we could also discuss the reality or conviction that "family matters," that is, that family is important or significant, that the family structure is valuable, and that it is worth our time and effort to build a family life that matters or is meaningful. . . .
>
> Now I don't think that there is a problem as such with our subject and its double entendre. But I do think it might take a bit of explaining to convince you that Paul's Letter to Philemon concerns "family matters" in both senses of the phrase. To be honest, my choosing to preach from this letter alone is of historic import. I must confess that I have never heard in all of my life this letter taught or preached in the African American church.

This letter that was used to justify the enslavement of African Americans and that figured significantly in questions of life and death could now speak a message of life and find its place in the worship traditions of a people who once felt it spoke only one message—slavery. Now it can offer a new message—reconciliation.

Demetrius K. Williams

Ongoing Issues

As mentioned above, this commentary occasionally attends to how Philemon has been read at various points in history, although it will not offer a systematic history of interpretation or text reception. As illustrated above, Philemon *has* been employed in the oppression of people, including many women, just as it has been used for their liberation. Philemon has been a significant text in struggles for power, and this commentary explores ways in which power dynamics operate internally in the letter. In addition, the contributing voices to this commentary, Carolina C. Dionco and Demetrius K. Williams, provide insights and guidance both regarding how Philemon has been read and also how it raises questions about current issues. Does Philemon play a role in places where slavery, or working conditions comparable to slavery, that may not be based solely on ethnicity but also on gender, age, or economic level, continue to exist or have arisen? Or, what have we to learn from *how* Philemon has been read and employed and *by whom*? Can this knowledge assist us as we grapple with the plight of peoples today? Moreover, in Paul's letter we get a glimpse of Onesimus, but we do not hear from him. Regardless of the background of the letter, we do not know what Onesimus wanted. This is often the experience of slaves at any point in history: they are not allowed to speak and, if they do, they are silenced or ignored. In this sense, Onesimus's experience is comparable to that of women throughout history who were not permitted to voice their views and, if they tried to do so, were either ignored or punished.

Despite not acknowledging Onesimus's wishes, if he expressed them, Paul is advocating that Onesimus be treated well. But Onesimus still remains "a 'living tool' caught between two 'masters' deciding on the use of his services."[37] This dimension of the slave experience is essential to remember, both for the ancient context and today. Slaves and people living in slave-like conditions are denied any agency and remain pawns used in negotiations between the more wealthy and powerful. They are reduced to physical instruments who feel the impact of others' maneuverings violently on their bodies.

Methodologically, this commentary attends to questions of letter structure, rhetoric, and the ancient context. Understanding some dimensions of ancient slavery—a massive and complex topic—is requisite as is a

37. J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 16.

consideration of social and cultural values, such as honor and shame, which were important values in Paul's context. The approach is feminist in that it explores how power dynamics work themselves out in the letter. How does Paul exert his power with this piece of correspondence? Who is acknowledged and who remains silent? Who might be listening as the letter is read aloud, and how might they have responded? Finally, how have more recent readers received this letter? By addressing these issues, the commentary attempts to take bodies seriously, both the bodies of the historical people involved in the production and reception of the letter to Philemon and, sometimes, those who through the centuries have experienced and endured the impact of its interpretation.

Runaway Slave? A Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Most letter writers, whether they are writing in the first or the twenty-first century, write in response to a situation that has arisen. They do not always explain the background or specific scenario that they are responding to, as they often assume that the recipients of the letter are familiar with at least some of the information. This observation is no less true for the apostle Paul, and therefore interpreters of his letters are left to reconstruct the possible events and scenarios that have arisen and to which he responds. In fact, much of Pauline scholarship is dedicated to this endeavor. Think of all the work that has been poured into who the Galatians were, where they lived, and how exactly they were engaging Jewish Law, not to mention what might have been going on in the Roman church!

The development of feminist approaches to biblical studies, in addition to the advances made by other more "marginal" voices within the history of interpretation, has assisted tremendously in enriching our appreciation for the complexity of the background to Paul's letters, even though many aspects of this history remain unclear. An important dimension of feminist hermeneutics is to question dominant paradigms and frameworks. For example, the degree to which women functioned in significant roles in Paul's churches remained largely overlooked for centuries, whereas today few would question the significance of someone such as Phoebe (Rom 16:1) or Junia (Rom 16:7). Paul's churches may not have been egalitarian, but his letters contain strong indications that women and other more marginal figures were important participants in the formation and development of these fledgling associations.

Although Philemon is Paul's shortest extant letter, the background to it is no less obscure than that of his other compositions. Indeed, Philemon

is perhaps even more puzzling in this regard. What exactly prompted Paul to write this letter? Paul is likely in prison, but where? Onesimus appears to be with Paul, but how did such a situation arise and what has he been doing in the service of Paul (Phlm 13)? Peter Arzt-Grabner has observed that Paul did not need to include more detail than he wanted to or mention things that he viewed as immaterial in order to accomplish his goals. Moreover, the information that is supplied by the letter "was presented by Paul according to the way in which *he*, personally, viewed the situation, which may have been very different from the way in which Philemon views it."[38] We are not provided an objective or descriptive view of what has transpired, and we are thus forced to attempt to reconstruct it based on clues in the letter itself. As many commentators have admitted, some questions about the situation are impossible to answer.

A Humanizing Interpretation of Philemon

Interpreters of Paul's letters are compelled by necessity to reconstruct the possible events and scenarios that have arisen and to which he responds because of the scarcity of background information supplied by the letters themselves. This is an essential aspect of Pauline scholarship. It is especially daunting with such a short and obscure letter as Philemon. In essence, the interpreter must engage in historical reconstruction. The interpretative tradition of Philemon sometimes gives a presumed assurance that we can be confident of what "really happened" or what "really took place." Many inside and outside the discipline of history have recognized more emphatically that the "raw events" of the past must be distinguished from the reconstruction of those events. Historical reconstruction involves perspective, opinion, interpretation, and organization as the historian/interpreter connects events with a particular purpose in mind. This is what gives rise to differing historical scenarios, and interpreters must argue for a particular scenario that seems right to her or him, basing her or his opinion on the best available evidence, of course. Thus the historical-critical interpretive paradigm of biblical interpretation demands that the interpretation of Scripture *must* begin with the historical reconstruction (background) of the (presumed) historical events in order for

38. Peter Arzt-Grabner, "How to Deal with Onesimus? Paul's Solution within the Frame of Ancient Legal Documentary Sources," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 113.

interpretation to be valid and accurate—the "meaning of the text is related primarily to its originally intended meaning."[39]

The normative interpretive paradigm disavows the use of the interpreter's experience, which includes that of her or his reading community, as a source and certainly not as a starting point for biblical interpretation. The only valid experience for interpretation is that of the *original biblical audience* and the presumed *originally intended meaning*. This has proved problematic in the experience of African American peoples because "it forces the interpreter to begin not with his or her own world situation, but in another one—that (one that is imagined or assumed to be) of the text. This orientation to the beginning or first step in interpretation is critical."[40] This reading paradigm, therefore, has tended to mute the voices and alternative readings of Scripture by those on the margins who are untrained in the art of historical reconstruction—or is it a playful game? According to Vincent L. Wimbush:

> Biblical exegetes and commentators have tended to range widely with their questions and issues. But the point here is that a dangerous game is set up whereby the commentator feigns to be faithful "to the text" while dancing with another set of issues. This game can, in fact, become so twisted and dizzying that it is for the most part and for too many interpreters no longer recognized for what it is; the game and its effects are acutely and profoundly and with devastating social-political effects obfuscating. There are high stakes in such practice for peoples on the periphery. At the very least, it keeps them distracted, unable to focus on their own world situation.[41]

To be sure, marginal readings take history seriously and at the same time try to keep focus on their own world situation. But they recognize that history and historical reconstruction are not the only determinants for interpreting Scripture: *experience* also is important, both the experience of those presented in the original setting(s) of biblical texts and, just as important, that of the flesh-and-blood readers who interpret them!

39. Gordon D. Fee, "History as Context for Interpretation," in *The Act of Bible Reading: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Elmer Dyck (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1996), 14.

40. Vincent L. Wimbush, " 'We Will Make Our Own Text': An Alternative Orientation to Interpretation," in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary,* ed. Brian Blount et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 44.

41. Ibid., 44.

This is why I began my discussion above with the real lived experience of African American people as they encountered and were affected by the interpretive history of Philemon. I wanted to open the interpretive possibilities of the letter to Philemon by using the collective experience of African Americans as a starting point for engaging Scripture. It was apparent that in their engagement with Scripture they *read the Bible through their experience* and, conversely, they read *their experience through the Bible*. This interpretive dialectic focusing on and starting with their lived experience was essential for maintaining their dignity, which the normative interpretation of Philemon thwarted and held in thraldom. The normative interpretation of Philemon "dehumanized" them, and they rejected the letter and its interpretation. However, by beginning with their "real life" contextual issues related to gender, racial, ethnic, political, social, or national concerns, a renewed reading of this text can "re-humanize" them and demonstrate also how Philemon can be interpreted to address their real human concerns.

Demetrius K. Williams

The "fugitive slave" hypothesis, a historical scenario presumed to lie behind the production of Philemon, remained the standard interpretation for many centuries: Onesimus has wronged Philemon in some way and fled; he met Paul in prison and became a believer under Paul's influence (Phlm 10); Paul is now sending him back to his master with the letter in hand. Although other ideas about this background situation emerged, especially during the antebellum period in the United States, this "traditional view" continued to dominate scholarly discussions of the letter until the 1980s and remains the presumed scenario in some contemporary studies. Those students I have had in classes who are familiar with the letter have usually only heard of the "fugitive slave" hypothesis, and some recent publications, including the work of a classicist who offers an informed discussion of ancient slavery, simply assume that Onesimus has run away from his master, Philemon.[42] The image of Onesimus the runaway slave endures as the presumed explanation for many.

42. Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (New York: Image Books, 2010), 148.

Challenges to the Runaway Slave Hypothesis

Many scholars have seriously questioned the notion that Onesimus is a fugitive slave. Why, for example, would Onesimus identify himself to one of Philemon's associates if he was seeking to escape from his master? Why is Onesimus apparently "with" Paul if the former is a runaway, for the two would not be held together in the same place where Onesimus could serve Paul (Phlm 13). Onesimus would be sent back immediately by the magistrates.[43] The imprisoned apostle would not be in a legal position to return a slave to a master.

Some scholars use the correspondence between Pliny the Younger and a patron, Sabinianus, about a freedman who has run away from the latter, as a historical comparison that could support the likelihood of the traditional view.[44] Pliny explicitly asks Sabinianus to forgive the freedman, however, and indicates that the fellow received a strong scolding and had shown clear signs of repentance. Pliny then sends a follow-up letter thanking Sabinianus for heeding his request. Paul says none of this to Philemon, nor is he writing about a freedman but about a slave. Finally, it is important to heed Arzt-Grabner's insight about the meaning of Phlm 15. In this verse, the Greek text reads ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὥραν, which is often translated as "he was separated from you for a while." Yet, as Arzt-Grabner has demonstrated, the passive form of χωρίζω always has an active meaning in the sense of "to go away" or "to depart," in both the literary and documentary evidence.[45] Paul adds πρὸς ὥραν, "for a while," and subsequently indicates that this absence occurred in order that Philemon may have him back forever. The limited time that Onesimus "went away," therefore, means that Onesimus did not intend to leave Philemon indefinitely. As J. Albert Harrill puts it, "the story of Onesimus the runaway slave looks more and more to be a fiction of Pauline interpreters."[46]

John Knox proposed another view in 1935.[47] Assuming that the letters to Philemon and to the Colossians were closely related and both

43. John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, NTG (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 100–101.

44. Pliny, *Ep.* 10.29-30. Eduard Lohse, for example, uses this correspondence as key comparison to Philemon in *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia: A Critical & Historical Commentary on the Bible, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 196–97.

45. See Arzt-Grabner, "How to Deal," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Prespective*, 123–24, and his earlier, "Onesimus *erro*: Zur Vorgeschichte des Philemonbriefes," *ZNW* 95 (2004): 131–43.

46. Harrill, *Slaves*, 7.

47. John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul* (New York: Abingdon, 1935).

authentically produced by Paul, Knox argued that Onesimus was the slave not of Philemon but of Archippus (Phlm 2; Col 4:17). He thought that Onesimus and Tychichus (see Col 4:7-9) were to stay with Philemon, a church overseer who lived in Laodicea, while on their journey, letter in hand, to Colossae where Archippus lived. In Knox's view, Paul was counting on Philemon to exert influence on Archippus to allow Onesimus to return to Paul to assist him permanently. Philemon was the first recipient of the letter, but it was to be sent on to Archippus with Onesimus in hopes that Philemon's authority would sway Archippus to grant Paul's request. Indeed, the letter is the one mentioned in Col 4:16, the "letter from Laodicea," because it had effectively emerged from there as Onesimus and Tychichus had stopped in that city to visit its resident, Philemon. For Knox, the letter was successful because Onesimus later became the bishop of Ephesus.

Several of Knox's ideas, such as the idea that the letter was ultimately directed to Archippus, were accepted by a few scholars.[48] Sara C. Winter built on Knox's argument and proposed that Onesimus was sent to Paul by Archippus and that Paul wrote his letter as a request that Onesimus be manumitted in order to assist him in his ministry.[49] Others, however, are less convinced by these hypotheses. For one, Knox's proposals rely on the notion that both Philemon and Colossians were written by Paul at about the same time, a notion that many Pauline scholars explicitly reject. It is not clear at all that Philemon is the same letter as the one mentioned in Col 4:16. In addition, Philemon is the first person addressed in the letter, then subsequently referred to with the singular "you" in Phlm 2 and 4. Based on the primary evidence, that is, the letter itself, the notion that the text is really directed to Archippus is highly doubtful. Another important observation is the fact that Paul agrees to repay any wrongdoing that Onesimus has caused (v. 18). This is hard to account for if Onesimus was originally sent to Paul, as Winter thinks.

Since the 1980s, however, other scenarios have emerged within scholarship. We have seen that Allan Dwight Callahan took a very different approach in that he thought that Onesimus and Philemon were biological brothers.[50] This proposition had been put forward much earlier

48. For discussion, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon,* AB 34C (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 15.

49. Sara C. Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *NTS* 33 (1987): 1–15.

50. It is possible that a master and slave could be biological half-brothers, as well, given the fact that slaves had to be sexually available to their masters.

in the nineteenth century, as we saw, and Albert Barnes's statement that Onesimus was not a slave at all was even dubbed the "Barnes Hypothesis." Callahan thinks that the key verse in support of the view that Philemon is a slave has been misread, for people have focused on the word for slave instead of the ὡς, "as," in Phlm 16a. He understands the ὡς to refer to "a virtual, not an actual, state of affairs."[51] The reference is not to Onesimus as a slave but to Philemon's attitude to Onesimus, using the image of a slave as "an antitype of a blood relative."[52] Such a reading has not proven to be convincing to most, however, for elsewhere in his letters Paul uses ὡς to refer to a factual state of affairs, such as in 1 Thess 2:7.[53] It is important to note the fact that the term δοῦλος ("slave") referred to slaves alone.[54] The slave status of Onesimus is also supported by the fact that Paul cannot presume that he can keep Onesimus with him to serve Paul on Philemon's behalf,[55] and the name, "Onesimus," which means "useful," was a typical slave name in the documentary papyri from Egypt. Paul's comment that Onesimus was once regarded as ἄχρηστος ("useless") to Philemon but is now εὔχρηστος ("useful") to Paul is a wordplay drawing on terminology, "useless" and "useful," that, although not exclusively used for slaves, was typical when describing enslaved persons, based on studies of the documentary papyri.[56] It seems indisputable that Onesimus was indeed a slave.

Fugitivus versus *Erro*

During the mid-1980s, significant questions were also raised as to whether Onesimus was truly a fugitive (*fugitivus*). Peter Lampe argued that if Onesimus were truly a runaway, it is hard to understand why he did not flee to a major city or join a gang. Rather, Onesimus, having wronged Philemon, left the slaveholder's house and went to Paul hoping that the apostle would intercede for him in some manner.[57] He was not attempting to flee from Philemon forever. This interpretation became

51. Callahan, "Paul's Epistle," 362.

52. Ibid., 370.

53. J. Albert Harrill has made this point in his review of *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* by Allen Dwight Callahan, in *CBQ* 60 (1998): 575–79.

54. Arzt-Grabner, "How to Deal," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 120.

55. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 99.

56. Arzt-Graber, "How to Deal," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 121–22.

57. See Peter Lampe, "Keine 'Sklavenflucht' des Onesimus," *ZNW* 76 (1985): 135–37.

known as the "intercession hypothesis" and relied on additional evidence from Roman slave law that made distinctions between a runaway slave (*fugitivus*) and a "truant" slave (*erro*), or one who ran to another person seeking assistance after some sort of wrongdoing.[58] Onesimus is clearly in trouble with Philemon, but not to the same extent as he would be had he been seeking to flee his bondage to the man altogether.

The above view, now accepted by a number of scholars, has been critiqued by Harrill. He questions whether the somewhat nuanced distinctions made by Roman jurists were appreciated by the average person in antiquity.[59] The jurists were academics centered in Rome, not practitioners and, unlike attorneys, were less involved in the day-to-day disputes and wranglings of the people.[60] Since their theories and ideas may not have extended far beyond the capital, can we therefore assume that clear definitions of either a *fugitivus* or an *erro* would be apparent in provincial centers? In addition, why does Paul not attempt to explain Onesimus's intentions to Philemon, or, as in the letters from Pliny to Sabinianus, affirm that he has rebuked Onesimus?[61]

Arzt-Grabner's work with documentary evidence, however, has provided additional helpful context on the issue of whether ordinary people would be aware of distinctions between a *fugitivus* and an *erro* as well as what exactly the distinctions between the two were.[62] In Justinian's Digest are legal passages that make distinctions between a *fugitivus* and an *erro* but which Harrill does not deem to be very reliable for determining what actually transpired on the ground with the buying and selling of slaves. Justinian's Digest preserves a large part of the Edict of the *curule aediles.* This edict dates to the Roman Republic and stipulates regulations for trading in slaves. Arzt-Grabner has shown that actual slave contracts, preserved among papyri, ostraca, and waxed tablets, make reference to this edict. Some of these contracts indicate that the vendor of the slave refused to guarantee that the slave was neither a truant (*erro*) nor a fugitive (*fugitivus*), while others, dating from the first and early second centuries, did provide such a guarantee to the buyer. Interestingly, in some

58. See the jurist Paulus (*Dig.* 21.1.43.1) as discussed by Harrill, *Slaves*, 8.

59. See Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101–2.

60. Harrill (*Slaves*, 8–11) explains the problems associated with the use of Roman jurists in analyzing Philemon.

61. Harrill, *Slaves*, 11.

62. Arzt-Grabner, "How to Deal," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 125–33.

contracts where the point that the slave is not a truant would normally appear, there is instead a statement that the slave is trustworthy (πιστός).

Arzt-Grabner's overall observation is that the contracts evidence an interaction between the practice of law and business dealings in Greco-Roman antiquity and that the distinction between an *erro* and a *fugitivus* is not a rarefied academic distinction but one that would have been familiar to those involved in the buying and selling of slaves. The knowledge of the differences between the two was probably quite common throughout the Roman Empire. This difference lay primarily in the attitude of the slave toward the master. The fugitive slave never wanted to return, whereas the truant was one who could prove that he or she intended to go back to the master, although at a later time than expected or allowed. Such a difference in attitude could have decisive impact on how the master viewed the slave when he or she returned or was deposited in the household and whether the master could trust the slave in the future.[63]

Arzt-Grabner states that nothing in the letter to Philemon suggests that Onesimus was a fugitive, yet likewise, there is nothing to indicate that Onesimus sought out Paul for help.[64] If the latter had been the case, Paul would have mentioned it, as Pliny does in his letter to Sabinianus, for it would be a strong argument in support of Paul's objective that Onesimus be treated well upon return to his master. Paul states in Phlm 17 that if Philemon considers Paul to be a κοινωνός ("partner"), then Philemon should receive Onesimus as if he would receive Paul himself. Papyrological evidence supports the notion that slaves could work as business associates with their masters. For Arzt-Grabner, Paul may well be asking Philemon to receive back his truant or "vagabond" slave not only well but as a business associate and, as Paul says, a "beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16). Although Onesimus has not been trustworthy in the past (v. 11), Paul wants to assure Philemon that he is now. Onesimus will stay with him "forever" (v. 15). Arzt-Grabner is worth citing at length on this point:

> Paul's demand was very unusual; he was actually asking Philemon to entrust a highly responsible task to a particular slave, and even to make him his partner—a slave who had to bear the ignominy of Philemon's verdict declaring him useless, and who seems to have yet again given

63. Ibid,. 133.

64. This is where Arzt-Grabner would disagree with Lampe, and others, such as James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 304.

> his master a good reason not to trust him. Yet that is exactly what Paul is asking for: Philemon should trust his slave, he should give him a real chance to prove his trustworthiness, i.e., his being πιστός, his πίστις. Onesimus' return and his promise to stay with his master forever, according to v. 15, are also based on his faith, his belief in Jesus Christ. When he became a member of the Christian community he also became a member of a new "family," with Paul as his "father" in a metaphorical sense. Now, Philemon, too, should accept him as a "brother."[65]

Exactly what sort of partnership or responsibility Paul imagines Philemon entrusting to Onesimus is not specified. Nor is it evident if Paul wants Philemon to eventually manumit his slave. As I observe later in this commentary, it could be that Paul wants to leave many of these decisions up to Philemon. Yet the letter was obviously preserved, copied for distribution, and eventually circulated with other Pauline texts. Such an outcome strongly suggests that Philemon did not react badly to the missive, and it is quite possible that he took seriously Paul's desire that Onesimus be given some sort of responsibility as a trustworthy partner in faith.

Arzt-Grabner's careful work on Philemon, basing itself simply on what the letter says and taking into account the rich trove of documentary evidence, produces, for me, the best scenario for imagining the background to the letter. Onesimus has done something wrong, but he is not a fugitive and, according to Paul, intended to stay away only for a while. It is not evident that he has specifically sought out Paul in prison in the hopes that Paul would intercede for him. Perhaps someone in the Christian community had taken Onesimus to see Paul while he was being held,[66] and the relationship between the two had developed from there. Paul clearly wants Philemon to receive back Onesimus as a "beloved brother" (Phlm 16)—no small request for a slave who had caused problems! Paul must tread carefully, for no doubt he is aware that Philemon may be rather irritated with Onesimus. The apostle must craft his request in a manner that will not alienate the slave owner. Below, then, I first address in broad strokes how Paul does this, before turning to more focused discussions of the letter's individual verses.

It is worth pausing and speculating, however, about the gender dimension of this background scenario. Would the letter to Philemon have ever been written, for example, were Onesimus not a male but a female slave? Although female slaves could move about in public, and Paul

65. Arzt-Grabner, "How to Deal," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 140.
66. Ibid., 135.

must have come into contact with them on a regular basis,[67] would he have intervened on behalf of a slave woman in these circumstances? We know that women, such as Apphia, were significant participants in ancient churches, but what about slave women? Did they have any sort of voice? Also, if there were slave women in Philemon's household one cannot help but wonder how they might have reacted to Paul's letter? Would they have resented such an intervention on behalf of Onesimus or rejoiced that Paul indicates concern for their fellow slave? It is impossible to answer such questions but worthwhile to momentarily pause and consider what a difference it might have made had a slave woman who had somehow wronged her owner come into contact with Paul rather than a man.

Reading Philemon in the Context of Slave Rebellion

Different scenarios have been proposed as background story for Paul's letter to Philemon. As discussed above, the fugitive slave hypothesis dominated most interpretations until the 1980s. This has been challenged given more understanding about slavery in the Greco-Roman world as well as more documentary evidence. Another challenge comes from attending to Paul's Jewish background. Paul as a Jew could not possibly have returned a fugitive slave to his owner citing Deut 23:15: "You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you."[68] What we have, then, are more critical readings of Philemon, but they would remain inadequate given the limitations imposed by the letter itself.

Given this, I would like to imagine another scenario by bringing in another historical reality that might have influenced the writing of the letter: slave rebellion. In studying the social context of Paul's letters, Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch identified slavery as a possible reading scenario and explained that slave rebellions existed in the second and first centuries BCE though they were usually led by

67. Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41–42.

68. Barbara Geller explains that this argument has been proposed by abolitionists in her "The Letter of Paul to Philemon," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 402–3.

prisoner-of-war slaves.[69] Could it be that the church in Philemon's house was grappling with this issue? Could there be slaves who are members of the church and who had joined the rebellion? A community inspired by the words and action of a "rebel from Galilee" and advocating various freedoms would not escape the watchful eyes of the Roman establishment. Could Paul have written the letter to Philemon, which he intended to be read in public, in order to allay any suspicion or to restore harmony in an increasingly divided church?

With this background, the letter mirrors either the mind-set of Paul or the general sentiment on how to deal with slaves. As suggested by many interpreters, Paul envisioned slaves as free and equal in the church even though he did not seek the abolition of slavery.[70] His appeal to Philemon reflects this sentiment, and he hoped that the church in Philemon's house would entertain the possibility of a transformed relationship though not a radical transformation.

I can see similarities in my own involvement with workers and how the institutional church generally responds. Oftentimes, when the workers assert their rights, rights that are legitimate and supported by the church's social teachings, their actions are immediately condemned and labelled as "rebellion" by their employers and sometimes by the state. It is not uncommon for the church to mediate in order to maintain harmony in the workplace, but the church's actions are immediately denounced and labelled as "meddling" by the business sector. In short, the business sector expects the church to aid in maintaining harmony by keeping the workers quiet so that there will be peace. This situation poses a dilemma for many church leaders.

It is certain that Paul wanted a community where familial love takes primacy over existing master-slave relations. His appeal was directed to Philemon, a slave owner, so that his decision and action are voluntary. I wonder if he extended the same option to Onesimus. Did Onesimus want to return voluntarily? After all, a slave is no longer a slave if he is no longer deprived of the freedom to decide for himself.

Carolina C. Dionco

69. Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 396–97.

70. Geller, "The Letter," in Levine and Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 404.

Letter Structure and Persuasive Power

Before engaging in an examination of the individual verses of Philemon, some discussion of the overall letter type, epistolary structure, and rhetorical features of the letter is in order. As is universally appreciated, Paul did not construct his letters randomly or in a cultural vacuum but employed many conventional tools that most letter writers in antiquity would use. By attending to some of the formal features of his letter, I will be in a better position to analyze what it was he was attempting to convey.

The Letter Type

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's extant letters, but it is still much longer than most letters that survive from antiquity. For example, it is half again as long as the comparable letter of Pliny to Sabinianus.[71] Yet although Paul's letters—even Philemon—are longer than many extant letters from the ancient world, it does not mean that they are what Adolf Deissmann classified as "epistles," or literary letters that were meant for public consumption as opposed to personal, private, or family letters. For Deissmann, epistles were pieces of literary art that could be understood apart from knowing the addressees and the context of the author, whereas letters required the private information in order to be intelligible.[72] This distinction between epistles and letters still holds true in some ways.

Yet there is recognition, based especially on comparisons with the surviving papyrological evidence, that many letters also bear the marks of an epistle if they are highly literary and contain sections that go beyond the immediate circumstances of the writer and/or recipients, offering elaborations and reflections on philosophical and theological topics. Such is the case with Paul's letters, which are indeed written to specific people in particular settings and attempt to engage with their concrete needs but also, quite often, provide extended arguments about a range of theological issues with which both the churches and Paul struggled. Thus, we can say that, while Paul's writings bear highly literary char-

71. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 187 n. 8.

72. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, rev. ed., trans. L. R. M. Strachan (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927), 228.

acteristics, they are truly letters in that they are meant for consumption by a limited number of people. Moreover, Paul will indicate that he has been delayed or intends to visit the community to which he is writing, a feature that is typical of a true letter, not an epistle.[73]

Scholars have attempted to determine, in turn, the nature of Philemon as a letter type. This determination depends in part on what Paul is actually doing with this letter. What is his goal? As we have seen, it is clear that he is advocating for the decent and compassionate treatment of Onesimus, although it is not obvious that the apostle is asking for the slave to be set free. He may, however, and as Arzt-Grabner put forward, be requesting that Philemon entrust Onesimus with considerable responsibilities in partnership. Perhaps Paul is asking for more than one thing? His letter remains somewhat open ended, and he is ostensibly leaving the final decision making up to Philemon. Given these characteristics and in consideration of the vocabulary of the letter, those who have compared Philemon to other letters from the ancient world find the most compelling resemblance either to letters of recommendation[74] or to those of mediation.[75] Paul is recommending that Onesimus be treated well, but he is also mediating a conflict insofar as Paul acknowledges that Onesimus has done something to incur Philemon's displeasure. In addition, Benjamin Fiore classifies Philemon as paraenesis or ethical exhortation, focused on spiritual kinship.[76] The letter could therefore be classified in more than one category, for it "seeks to accomplish far more than can be indicated by means of one or two terms."[77]

73. Peter Arzt-Grabner, "'I was intending to visit you, but . . .' Clauses Explaining Delayed Visits and their Importance in Papyrus Letters and in Paul," in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, ed. Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 223.

74. Chan-Hie Kim, *Form and Structure of the Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation*, SBLDS 4 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1972).

75. Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, LEC 5 (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1986), 155.

76. Benjamin Fiore, SJ, "Christian Kinship in the Paraenesis of Philemon," in *The Impartial God: Essays in Biblical Studies in Honor of Jouette M. Bassler,* ed., Calvin J. Roetzel and Robert L. Foster (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 246–52.

77. D. Francis Tolmie, "Tendencies in the Research on the Letter to Philemon since 1980," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 11.

The Letter Structure

In structuring this "multipurpose" letter Paul follows his typical pattern in its composition. There is no universal agreement among scholars as to the entire epistolary structure of Philemon, but there are points of consensus on most sections, and the disagreements that exist are not dramatic. My discussion here follows primarily the analysis of Jeffrey A. D. Weima, as he bases his analysis of the letter structure not only on comparisons with other Pauline letters but with the rich trove of papyrological evidence.[78] I also engage the insights of others who have studied the structure of this letter.

It is widely agreed that the opening of the letter consists of verses 1-3. Letter openings tend to be quite consistent in the Pauline collection, usually containing the reference to the sender, namely, Paul and Timothy, in verse 1; the recipient, which here includes Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church in "your" (singular) house in verse 2; and the greeting in verse 3. Paul uses an opening typical for letter writers of his day but leaves his own mark, such as the use of χάρις ("grace" or "benefit") instead of χαιρεῖν ("rejoice").[79] The greeting of grace and peace is intended for the group as the plural for "you" is employed here, as it is at the end of the letter (Phlm 22, 25). Despite the impression that this may be a private letter because Paul refers to "you" and "brother" (v. 20), meaning Philemon, throughout, it is clear from the opening that the letter has a very public dimension. Timothy is referred to as a co-sender, and the recipient is not only Philemon but two other named people as well as the church in Philemon's house. The primary recipient may well be Philemon, but the issues that Paul raises in the letter are intended to be of concern for the church as a whole.

Scholars also agree that the thanksgiving of the letter is found in Phlm 4-7. Here, Paul offers thanks to God, assures the recipients that he remembers them in his prayers, and indicates that he is impressed by their love and faith for the Lord Jesus Christ and all the saints (vv. 4-5). He then prays that the sharing of the faith of the letter's audience may promote further knowledge of all the good that is in Christ (v. 6). Philemon 7 expresses Paul's joy and comfort from Philemon's love, in particular, and Paul refers to Philemon as ἀδελφέ, "brother." Paul has

78. Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "Paul's Persuasive Prose: An Epistolary Analysis of the Letter to Philemon," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 29–60.

79. Ibid., 31.

effectively praised Philemon for his love. As an expression of joy is often found in Greek papyri, Paul is following a very typical letter convention here. Although the verse does not formally belong to the thanksgiving, which closes with Paul's reference to his prayers, neither does it begin the body of the letter. It connects to verse 6 with the "for" (γὰρ)[80] and forms a transition into the body of the letter through keywords such as "love" (ἀγάπη; vv. 5, 7, 9), "hearts" (σπλάγχνα; vv. 7, 12, 20), "refresh" (ἀναπαύω; vv. 7, 20), and the vocative "brother" (ἀδελφέ; vv. 7, 20). In James D. G. Dunn's assessment, what we have here is a substantial articulation of "genuine respect and regard,"[81] which would be important to articulate at this point, for it prepares Paul to enter into the body and main message of his letter.

The main body of the letter lies in Phlm 8-18 and reflects the letter writing convention of an "appeal formula" (vv. 8-10) at its opening. This serves as an indicator of a transition either from the thanksgiving to the body, as is the case here, or within the body, as in other of Paul's letters (e.g., Rom 12:1). Building on the work of Carl Bjerkelund, Weima points out that appeals could be "soft" if the writer expected the recipient to fulfill whatever the request of the writer might be, whereas if the author anticipated resistance, a command would be used. Paul is aware of this distinction in how one can make requests, for in verse 8, he indicates that he has a right to command Philemon to do something but in verse 9, says that he prefers to "appeal" (παρακαλῶ) for love's sake to Philemon, employing the vocabulary of appeals (especially the verb παρακαλέω) commonly used in private and official letters.[82] Paul uses παρακαλῶ again in verse 10, "on behalf of my child, to whom I gave birth in prison, Onesimus," thus doubling his appeal on the basis of love, for which he had praised Philemon in the thanksgiving section.

Philemon is presumably expected to live up to the "love" that Paul had lauded. In addition, the fact that Paul had stated that he is aware that he could command Philemon to do something in Phlm 8 functions as a form of pressure. Paul does indeed leave things up to Philemon, but the apostle has also reminded the slave owner that he, Paul, is capable of exerting his authority. This method of "appeal" but with the reminder of who is truly in charge appears again in verse 14, when Paul indicates that he prefers to do nothing without Philemon's consent, such as keep

80. Ibid., 42.
81. Dunn, *The Epistles*, 316.
82. Weima, "Paul's," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 46–47.

Onesimus with him, in order that Philemon's good deed should be voluntary and not forced. As John M. G. Barclay says, on each occasion when Paul makes an appeal, "the more brutal alternative is mentioned as a none-too-subtle indication of a hierarchical relationship between Paul and Philemon."[83] These rhetorical features of Paul's letter are elaborated further below; invoking them here is simply to reveal to what extent Paul uses persuasive means in writing his letter.

There is some disagreement among interpreters as to where the body of the letter ends and where the letter closing begins. Considering that other letters by Paul commence the letter closing with an autograph formula along the lines of the beginning of Phlm 19 (see 1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11) and the fact that this is common practice within the Greek papyri, "it would seem probable"[84] that Philemon begins its closing in verse 19. The argument that the letter body ends in verses 17-18 is supported by the observation that here the letter hits a climax in which Paul clearly asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul and then brings the request to a close in verse 18 by affirming that he will repay any debts that Onesimus has incurred. Paul also uses a concluding particle, οὖν ("so"), in verse 17 and two imperatives in verses 17 and 18, adding further weight to the argument that verse 18 forms the end of the body of the letter.[85]

In addition to the autograph in Phlm 19, the concluding section includes some rhetorical features, such as the parenthetical comment of verse 19b, exhortation (v. 20), an expression of confidence that Philemon will be obedient (v. 21), a reminder to prepare a room as Paul wants to visit (v. 22), greetings (vv. 23-24), and a grace benediction (v. 25). Paul employs some of the practices he uses in his other letters in bringing this short missive to a close. This letter structure serves as the organizing pattern of my two chapters engaging directly with the text of Philemon.

Rhetoric in the Letter

In reviewing the structure of Philemon briefly here, I have provided occasional intimations of Paul's rhetorical powers. The letter has been characterized as a piece of "'holy flattery' . . . by which Paul butters up his friend."[86] Whatever Paul wants Philemon to do, he is making

83. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 103.
84. Weima, "Paul's," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 53.
85. Ibid.
86. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 103.

his request carefully and strategically, as any good letter writer would. Although there is debate about whether Paul was formally trained in ancient rhetorical techniques, it is fair to say that rhetoric was part of the ancient air that the apostle breathed. Regardless of his level of education, Paul could have easily picked up and used various rhetorical techniques familiar in some form to those who could read and write.

These readers and writers in Greco-Roman antiquity could include women and slaves. It was true that female literacy rates were much lower than those of men,[87] and most menial slaves were illiterate, but it was advantageous for many slave owners to have slaves who could read and write.[88] Just because very few women and slaves could actually read Paul's letter does not mean, however, that Paul's rhetoric and manipulations of power within the letter would have been lost on their ears. If the letter were read aloud in the church, these listeners, like anyone else, may have quite perceptively understood the power play at work in Paul's rhetoric. Indeed Paul was quite likely counting on their "overhearing" his letter, since they could possibly influence Philemon, albeit indirectly. The scenario involving Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus was not private, but it would be played out in the court of public opinion, where people, including women and slaves, would talk and exchange looks. Philemon's reputation could be destroyed were he not to live up to the virtues that Paul praises him for in the letter. In part, this reputation was upheld by the honor he would receive by those around him, including those with less or little direct power. When we envision the letter being read, therefore, we must remember these silent figures as potential members of the overall audience. Paul's rhetoric would not be lost on them and Philemon would have known this.

Contemporary rhetorical studies of this letter span a broad, even dizzying, range of approaches. One of the earliest, published by F. Forester Church in 1978, analyzed the letter according to the categories found within ancient deliberative rhetoric: the *exordium*, or the beginning of a speech; the *proof*, or main body of the deliberation; and the *peroratio*, or conclusion of the speech.[89] Others have further developed Church's

87. See William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 107.

88. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 258.

89. Frank Forrester Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *HTR* 71 (1978): 18–33.

work,[90] while some scholars use insights from contemporary studies of rhetoric and communication[91] in order to isolate specific strategies that they observe at work in Philemon. There are those exegetes who prefer to focus on very particular rhetorical dimensions of the letter, such as Paul's appeal to his old age (v. 9),[92] his references to his imprisonment (v. 1),[93] as well as his economic and political language,[94] while still others prefer to use a "text-centered approach" whereby they attempt to describe "all the means in the text . . . that the author uses in order to persuade his readers."[95]

These are only a sampling of the various studies of Philemon that have attempted to elucidate the manner in which Paul composes his letter. Even the mention of these studies is evidence that there is wide appreciation for the skill and strategy that Paul employs in order to communicate effectively by means of this text. My own commentary engages with these rhetorical studies as I work through the letter, but I do not attempt a full-scale rhetorical analysis. Given all of the other aspects that require attention within this commentary series, especially the concerns of women and marginal figures—in the text, as subjects affected by the text, and as interpreters of the text—there is not space for the kind of close rhetorical analysis that others have already done. I encourage the reader to pursue the titles mentioned in the footnotes for further detail regarding the rhetorical skill and strategy of Paul.[96]

90. For example, S. Scott Bartchy, "Philemon, Epistle to," *ABD* 5 (1992): 305–10; Clarice J. Martin, "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon (Verse 18)," in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, ed., Duane F. Watson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 321–37.

91. For example, Andrew Wilson, "The Pragmatics of Politeness and Pauline Epistolography: A Case Study of the Letter to Philemon," *JSNT* 48 (1992): 107–19.

92. Ronald F. Hock, "A Support for His Old Age: Paul's Plea on Behalf of Onesimus," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 67–81.

93. Craig S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*, JSNTSup 130 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996).

94. Scott S. Elliott, " 'Thanks, but no Thanks': Tact, Persuasion, and the Negotiation of Power in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *NTS* 57 (2011): 51–64.

95. Andries H. Snyman, "Persuasion in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 20 (2009): 178–93.

96. Tolmie ("Tendencies in the Research," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 11–16) offers a brief survey of some of the scholarship on the rhetoric of Phlm.

I Have Known Their Sufferings

A literary strength of Philemon is its open-endedness. To explore this aspect, we need to go beyond the letter's twenty-five verses and imagine what happened next. A letter expects a response. Paul would have expected a response from Philemon. Many commentators have assumed that Philemon granted Paul's request. The apostle was confident of Philemon's obedience and that "he will do even more" (Phlm 21). F. F. Bruce is certain that Philemon granted Paul's request; "otherwise the letter to Philemon would not have survived."[97] Nevertheless, I would like to deviate from this common assumption and to imagine a different scenario: What if Philemon denied Paul's request? N. T. Wright suggests a threefold request in Paul's letter: withhold punishment, return Onesimus to Paul as an assistant, and give Onesimus his freedom.[98] As Raymond E. Brown suggests, the request asked that the "Christian slave owner defy the conventions."[99] To be sure, there would be repercussions in terms of social and financial status.

That Philemon would refuse Paul's request is therefore plausible. He might have refused to forgive Onesimus and led him to be branded or crucified.[100] He might have demanded financial reparation from Paul. This response, though it certainly will not "refresh the heart of the saints" (Phlm 7), is not difficult to imagine. Philemon would merely be acting the part of a slave owner. It is just how things were. In fact, Philemon's action would be a typical response from a wealthy and powerful Christian faced with possible economic loss if he followed the gospel. Appeals to solidarity, to being created in the image and likeness of God, and to being equals are incomprehensible when social and economic privileges are threatened. In the Philippines, despite the church's appeal, Christian businesspeople violate their workers' rights

97. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians,* NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 200. Bruce is quoted in Cain Hope Felder, "The Letter to Philemon: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. XI, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 904.

98. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithful Witness of God, Book I* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 15.

99. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament,* ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 506.

100. As historian Milton Meltzer describes slavery during the Roman era, runaway slaves were branded or crucified when caught. Milton Meltzer, *Slavery: A World History*, rev. ed. (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1993), 177.

to a just wage, safe working conditions, and job security. Many religious institutions circumvent labor laws. Many are turning a blind eye to women's slave-like conditions in households and factories because it is profitable.

Paul's request to Philemon can be read as an appeal to solidarity that begins with conversion to being poor, weak, and defenseless. The appeal echoes Jesus' words to the rich man to "go, sell what you have, and give to the poor" (Mark 10:21) and ultimately goes back to God who said,

> I have seen, yes, seen the affliction of my people that is in Egypt,
> Their cry have I heard in the face of their slave-drivers;
> Indeed, I have known their sufferings![101] (Exod 3:7).

Carolina C. Dionco

101. Translation from Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*: *A New Translation, Introduction, Commentary and Notes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

Philemon 1-18

Allies and Tension

Creating Allies (Phlm 1-7)

Opening (Phlm 1-3)

Paul begins the letter to Philemon by clearly identifying himself as "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ" (Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ; v. 1). This self-designation appears in the disputed Pauline letter to the Ephesians (3:1) and in the noncanonical 3 Corinthians, also called *The Third Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* (found in the *Acts of Paul*). Elsewhere, Paul will refer to himself as an "apostle" (ἀπόστολος) or "servant/slave" (δοῦλος), such as in Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. Even in Philippians, Paul's other surviving "prison letter," he does not refer to himself as a "prisoner" but speaks of himself and Timothy as "slaves" (δοῦλοι) of Christ Jesus. This is such an unusual self-designation that scribes copying the manuscript of Philemon changed it to "Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ" or "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ."[1] A variety of explanations for the reference to his prisoner status have been put forward, but by far the most common reason presented is that Paul is actually in prison. Later on in the letter he refers to this imprisonment (vv. 9, 10, 13), and near

1. See Craig S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*, JSNTSup 130 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 148.

Philemon 1-3

[1]Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, [2]to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

[3]Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

the end of Philemon, he expresses his hope that he may be "restored" (χαρισθήσομαι) to Philemon and his community (v. 22), an expression of a desire to be released.[2]

Paul's explicit reference to imprisonment also has rhetorical power, for it underlines Paul's solidarity with the slave Onesimus, and by signaling his own lowly status, Paul has effectively boosted that of Philemon.[3] The fact that Paul uses the genitive "of Jesus Christ" (v. 1) here is an indication that his incarceration is a result of his relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ. By beginning the letter in this way, Paul presents himself as a loyal follower of Jesus, refusing to forfeit his commitment or abandon his post. Such an image recalls that of a faithful solider who, against all odds, obstinately declines to give up his post, even if remaining means facing death. Philosophers staunchly committed to their principles were likewise represented in the ancient world. Such steadfastness and courage were highly admired and, rhetorically, would undergird the presentation of Paul as someone worthy of "attention and support."[4]

Unfortunately, Paul does not indicate where this prison was and, although interpreters have argued for a variety of locales, no definitive conclusions have been reached. Many scholars have argued for Ephesus. The Acts of the Apostles describes several times in which Paul is placed in custody, but never in Ephesus. The Marcionite Prologue to the letter to the Colossians does mention that the apostle was in bonds when he wrote to Ephesus, however, and Paul uses the image of fighting with beasts in Ephesus as a figure of speech in 1 Cor 15:32. Thus there is some ancient evidence that Paul may have spent time imprisoned in Ephesus. If Philemon is in Colossae, the distance between Ephesus and Colossae

2. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon,* AB 34C (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 123.

3. Andrew Wilson, "The Pragmatics of Politeness and Pauline Epistolography: A Case Study of the Letter to Philemon," *JSNT* 48 (1992): 113.

4. Wansink, *Chained*, 173.

would probably have been approximately a week's walk.[5] But placing the sender and main recipient in these two cities of Asia Minor must remain conjectural to some extent.

Paul identifies Timothy as the co-sender of the letter and as ὁ ἀδελφὸς, "the brother" (Phlm 1), which is usually translated as "our brother" because this sibling relationship is likely shared in some sense with Philemon and the other recipients of the letter. Paul is not describing a biological relationship here but a bond based upon a shared commitment to Christ. Timothy appears as a co-sender in additional letters such as 1 Thessalonians (1:1) and Philippians (1:1), as well as in the deutero-Pauline letter to the Colossians (1:1). Acts 16:1-3 describes how Timothy, son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father, became Paul's coworker, including becoming circumcised at Paul's request in order to participate in the mission to the Jews. Clearly Timothy is a trusted coworker of Paul's, and the reference to him in Philemon means that he presumably supports Paul's appeal.[6] Timothy may have been assisting Paul while the apostle was in captivity. Although he appears as a co-sender, there is no evidence that he wrote this letter, for Paul proceeds in verse 4 with a reference to himself in the singular, and in verses 9 and 19 he refers to himself alone.

Paul then addresses the recipients of the letter, beginning with Philemon, then Apphia, Archippus, the church in "your" (σου, singular) house (Phlm 1-2). Philemon's name, which was common, is related to a Greek word that means "to love," and it could be that the name prompted Paul to refer to him as "beloved" (ἀγαπητός),[7] which is translated as "our dear friend." Yet it also introduces the theme of love (ἀγάπη), a theme that continues to surface throughout the letter (vv. 5, 7, 9, 16).[8] Paul praises Philemon for his love and refers to Onesimus as "a beloved brother" in verse 16. There is undoubtedly a rhetorical dimension to Paul's choice of adjectives here, for the designation of Philemon as "beloved" indicates a special relationship between Paul and Philemon, especially because Philemon is a "co-worker" and involved in the work of the gospel.[9] Yet such a designation will also bind Philemon

5. Fitzmyer, *The Letter*, 10.

6. Ibid., 85.

7. Ibid., 86.

8. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 189.

9. Andries H. Snyman, "Persuasion in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 20 (2009): 182.

in a special relationship to Onesimus, who is also beloved, as indicated in verse 16. From the very beginning then, Paul has established a basis of love for the request that he makes of Philemon regarding another "beloved."

Next, Paul addresses Apphia, whom, as we mentioned above, he identifies as "Apphia our sister" (Ἀπφίᾳ τῇ ἀδελφῇ; v. 2). Sara C. Winter has suggested that Apphia could be a church leader,[10] but it is impossible to make this claim definitively since Paul provides so little information about her, and she is not mentioned anywhere else. Many scholars have concluded that Apphia is Philemon's wife, since her name appears after his,[11] yet Apphia's name is in fact in a median position between those of Philemon and Archippus. If she were Philemon's wife, one would think that Paul might connect them through a "complimentary epithet" such as "my fellow workers," as he does of Prisca and Aquila in Rom 16:13,[12] even though, admittedly, we do not know if Prisca and Aquila were a married couple. At any rate, it is interesting that Paul calls Apphia "our sister," which corresponds to his reference to Timothy as "brother" because the only other "sister" that Paul refers to in his letters is Phoebe, a benefactor and deacon to the church (Rom 16:1-2).

As Wendy Cotter points out, when one compares the epithets for Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus here, "it is Apphia's that holds the most prestige."[13] Although, as I have indicated, Philemon is the primary recipient of this letter, Apphia is an important witness to it. It is quite possible that Paul may have viewed her as "an ally who could intervene in support of his request."[14] As a witness to what Paul has to say to Philemon, and as an important member of the church, Apphia may have been in a position to exert some influence on Philemon. Perhaps she, along with Archippus and the rest of the church, could pressure Philemon into doing the honorable thing, which is to treat Onesimus well and welcome him as an honorable brother. Apphia could thus play an important role in ensuring that Paul's wishes are carried out. Despite

10. Sara C. Winter, "Philemon," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 308.

11. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 190.

12. Wendy J. Cotter, "Women's Authority Roles in Paul's Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?" *NovT* 36 (1994): 351.

13. Ibid.

14. Sabine Bieberstein, "Philemon: A Reading under Apphia's Critical Eyes," in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 850.

the deep and pervasive patriarchy of the ancient world, it is evident that women, especially wealthy women, could manifest considerable power and authority both within the household and in the broader spheres such as the synagogue and association, whether they were formal "leaders" or not.[15] As mentioned above, it is not unrealistic to imagine that Paul anticipated that his letter would be read aloud in the church and that he hoped Apphia and others would provide oversight and pressure, seeing to it that Philemon would respect Paul's wishes and safeguarding that "those without voices" not be forgotten.[16]

After Apphia, Paul addresses Archippus as "our fellow soldier" (τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν; Phlm 2). This is presumably the same Archippus mentioned in the letter to the Colossians (4:17), but otherwise we know nothing about this person. The only other time that Paul calls someone a "fellow soldier" is when he commends Epaphroditus to the Philippians (Phil 2:25). In Philemon, it coheres nicely with Paul's own self-characterization as a prisoner loyal to Christ.[17] Just as Paul appreciates Epaphroditus, he is likely grateful for Archippus's service to the church, and Archippus, like Apphia, serves as another witness to Paul's message. Some have argued that the letter is really addressed to Archippus,[18] but this is highly unlikely given that Philemon's is the first name listed.[19] Moreover, there is no evidence that Archippus is the son of Philemon and Apphia, or, as mentioned earlier, that Philemon and Apphia were married.

Paul also addresses the letter to "the church in your house." The church likely meets in Philemon's home, since Paul uses the singular "your" (σου) here, but we must not assume that Philemon has a giant villa just because he is wealthy enough to own a slave. It is also impossible to know how large this congregation was. At any rate, Paul's reference to this church underscores the fact that these other people will also hear the letter and be able to exercise some degree of pressure on Philemon

15. See Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues,* BJS 36 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982); John S. Kloppenborg and Richard S. Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations and Commentary,* BZNW 181 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).

16. Sabine Bieberstein, "Disrupting the Normal Reality of Slavery: A Feminist Reading of the Letter to Philemon," *JSNT* 70 (2000): 116.

17. See Wansink, *Chained in Christ,* 173.

18. John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul* (New York: Abingdon, 1935), 57–70.

19. Todd D. Still, *Philippians and Philemon* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2011), 165.

to respond positively to Paul's request. Paul's strategy of addressing the letter to a group of people, including women and possibly other slaves, rather than solely to Philemon is astute, for he has "raised the stakes to that of a public hearing."[20] This would be quite effective in an honor-shame culture in which a wrong move could cost a person and his family and/or associates a considerable loss in status. Given that the letter will be shared aloud with the church, Philemon will need to respond in a manner that preserves his honor, especially because he hosts the church in his house. He may even be considered a patron to the church.[21] As such, he will surely not want to lose face with this larger group because he has a reputation and some degree of power to uphold.

Paul then extends greetings of "grace" (χάρις) and "peace" (εἰρήνη) that come from both "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" to the entire group (Phlm 3). This greeting is standard for Paul but alters the typical ancient Greek address of the simple "greeting" or "rejoice" (χαίρειν) that we find among ancient papyri letters and in some other New Testament documents such as James (1:1). For Paul, the expression of grace or "benefit" extending from God "our Father" reminds the recipients that God is their benefactor and their provider and that the Lord Jesus Christ is the one for whom Paul undergoes imprisonment and is, throughout the letter, the basis for Paul's appeal to Philemon (vv. 1, 8-9, 16, 20, 23).[22]

Finally, it is important to mention that this greeting has drawn Paul, Timothy, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church into a community bonded by grace and peace that emerges from God and from Jesus Christ. This is a sharing—a *koinonia*—that Paul has established, and as James A. Noel has observed, Paul's greeting "establishes a framework of . . . fellowship"[23] that undergirds his appeal for welcoming Onesimus as a "beloved brother" (Phlm 16) into precisely *this* community.

20. J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 13.

21. See Scott S. Elliott, "'Thanks, but no Thanks,': Tact, Persuasion, and the Negotiation of Power in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *NTS* 57 (2011): 54.

22. See Still, *Philippians and Philemon*, 167.

23. James A. Noel, "Nat Is Black: The Return of the Re/Oppressed in Philemon," in *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, ed. Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 64.

Thanksgiving (Phlm 4-7)

These verses comprise the thanksgiving of the letter and, in rhetorical terms, the *exordium*. The *exordium* seeks to encourage or displace prejudice and reduce or magnify the importance of the subject.[24] Here, Paul switches to the singular "you" and tries to "mollify" Philemon by both praising him (Phlm 4-5) and highlighting exemplary qualities of the man, such as his love and his ability to refresh others. These are qualities that Paul appeals to again in the body of the letter.[25] In short, Paul wants to put Philemon in a good mood by complimenting him and emphasizing the virtuous merits that Philemon may feel the obligation to live up to later on when Paul makes more specific requests regarding the treatment of Onesimus.

Paul not only flatters Philemon in this section but also, as is typical in the thanksgiving sections of his letters, refers to themes to which he returns throughout the rest of the letter. First, Paul refers to the central theme of "love" (ἀγάπη) and, interestingly, puts it ahead of "faith" (πίστις) in Phlm 5 because he wants to highlight Philemon's love that he refers to again in verse 7. In other letters, Paul will refer to the three virtues of faith, hope, and love, such as in Rom 5:1-5 and 1 Cor 13:13. Here, as in 1 Corinthians, he wants to feature love, and he places it first, before faith. As we have seen, Paul has already referred to Philemon as ἀγαπητός ("beloved" or "dear") in the opening address, and in the body of the letter he appeals to love (v. 9) and refers to Onesimus as ἀγαπητός in verse 16.

A reference to "sharing" (κοινωνία) appears in Phlm 6 and surfaces again in verse 17. Such "sharing" or fellowship was invoked, although not by the specific term, in the opening greeting. This sharing likely means more than simply participation in the church; it could also indicate some financial and legal benefits that Philemon has provided for the community. Paul may deliberately invoke it here because he is hoping that such sharing will also extend to Onesimus,[26] as it has to Paul himself (v. 17).

24. See Clarice J. Martin, "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon (Verse 18)," in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, ed. Duane F. Watson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 326. Martin cites Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.1.9; 3.14.1, for information on the function of specific rhetorical elements or divisions.

25. Martin, "The Rhetorical Function," 326.

26. See Lloyd A. Lewis, "An African American Appraisal of the Philemon-Paul-Onesimus Triangle," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 243.

Philemon 4-7

[4]When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God [5]because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. [6]I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. [7]I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

Philemon 6 is quite tricky, however. Although the verse focuses on Philemon's faith, it is not clear how Paul hopes that Philemon's sharing of faith or in faith will be effective.[27] What is the "good" (ἀγαθόν) that "we may do for Christ" to which Paul refers (v. 6)? In verse 14, Paul describes Philemon's "good deed" (τὸ ἀγαθόν) as the response that he anticipates from the man. Perhaps Paul intends a connection between these good things?

Third, in verse 7 Paul not only refers to Philemon's love again; he expresses that he has received joy and encouragement because Philemon has refreshed the "hearts" (τὰ σπλάγχνα) of the saints. Τὰ σπλάγχνα literally refer to intestines or bowels; it is an emotional term that underscores the degree of feeling that the "saints" have experienced.[28] Unexplained is how Philemon has effected this refreshment, although it is quite likely of a concrete nature, such as providing hospitality. What is interesting is how the phrasing again anticipates subsequent parts of the letter, such as when Paul refers to Onesimus as his own heart, again using τὰ σπλάγχνα in verse 12, and in verse 20 when Paul asks Philemon to "refresh my heart [τὰ σπλάγχνα] in Christ."

At the end of the thanksgiving, Paul refers to Philemon as "brother" (ἀδελφέ; Phlm 7). He thus ends the section by highlighting the close relationship that he has with this particular householder who has done so much for the community of believers. Paul addresses Philemon again as brother in verse 20, while in verse 16 he refers to Onesimus as a "beloved brother" (ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν) both to himself and especially to Philemon. Paul therefore combines two words that he applies to Philemon separately, "beloved" and "brother," in his description of Onesimus.

Paul might be described as adulatory in this thanksgiving, at least in comparison to contemporary Western manners of praising of others,

27. Still, *Philippians and Philemon*, 169.
28. Snyman, "Persuasion," 183.

insofar as he heaps compliments[29] upon Philemon. Given the fact that he will make a difficult and awkward request of the slave owner—asking not for manumission but for a forgiving and loving welcome and inclusion of Onesimus as a beloved brother—he must do all he can in order to prompt Philemon to be favorably disposed toward his appeal. Nothing in this *exordium*/thanksgiving is extraneous, for the ideas introduced here are at the heart of the letter. Themes such as love, sharing, brotherhood, refreshing the hearts, and the notion of "the good" are all set forth in the thanksgiving, and Paul returns to them subsequently. Although modern readers might perceive Paul to be laying it on a little thick, as the letter progresses Paul will "cash in" on these compliments[30] for the sake of the slave whom he has come to know.

Tensions in the Letter (Phlm 8-18)

The Letter Body

Paul has greeted the recipients and offered a thanksgiving that introduces some of the themes of his letter, but here, in the body, he gets to the heart of the matter. Rhetorically, this section of the text is the proof, and in this proof we find Paul's request, as ambiguous as it might appear. Compared to appeals in papyri letters, however, the appeal in Philemon is very long and has perplexed interpreters as to what it is that Paul is actually asking.[31] The opacity of Paul's request has, not surprisingly, led to an array of conclusions about the meaning of Philemon, especially from the early nineteenth century on, as I briefly explored earlier.

The Appeal of an Old Man

The opening of the proof consists of an appeal formula (Phlm 8-10) in which Paul indicates an awareness that appeals could be mild or

29. As F. Forrester Church ("Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *HTR* 71 [1978]: 23) says, in the thanksgiving, "Paul has put Philemon to the blush."

30. John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 103.

31. For example, John L. White ("The Structural Analysis of Philemon: A Point of Departure in the Form of the Pauline Letter," SBLSP 1 [1971]: 36) says, "the request is so oblique, so faltering, that one has difficulty in determining what it is, precisely, Paul requests."

Philemon 8-18

8For this reason, though I am bold
enough in Christ to command you to do
your duty, 9yet I would rather appeal to
you on the basis of love—and I, Paul,
do this as an old man, and now also as
a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10I am ap-
pealing to you for my child, Onesimus,
whose father I have become during my
imprisonment. 11Formerly he was use-
less to you, but now he is indeed useful
both to you and to me. 12I am sending
him, that is, my own heart, back to you.
13I wanted to keep him with me, so that
he might be of service to me in your
place during my imprisonment for the
gospel; 14but I preferred to do nothing
without your consent, in order that your
good deed might be voluntary and not
something forced. 15Perhaps this is the
reason he was separated from you for
a while, so that you might have him
back forever, 16no longer as a slave but
more than a slave, a beloved brother—
especially to me but how much more to
you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.
17So if you consider me your part-
ner, welcome him as you would wel-
come me. 18If he has wronged you in
any way, or owes you anything, charge
that to my account.

demanding as he says that he could command Philemon but prefers, instead, to appeal on the basis of love. Because Philemon has already received praise for his love, the householder now has the chance to demonstrate that love by heeding Paul's request.[32] Paul cleverly engages *ethos* and *pathos* here, for he waives his authority, choosing to depend on Philemon's compliance, which "has the effect of establishing an *a fortiori* argument,"[33] but then in verses 9 and 10 he employs the verb "appeal" (παρακαλῶ) twice, which has the effect of pulling "on Philemon's heart strings."[34] And only after doubly "appealing" to the slave owner does Paul then actually mention Onesimus by name (v. 10).

In addition, Paul once again refers to his imprisonment in Phlm 9 and 10, and in verse 9, he explicitly refers to himself as an "old man" (πρεσβύτης). Historically, πρεσβύτης has often been translated as "ambassador" because confusion in the manuscripts between πρεσβύτης and πρεσβευτής for the word "ambassador" has been understood to mean that πρεσβύτης can mean ambassador on almost any occasion.[35] Ronald F. Hock points out that in Greek sources from Paul's time period there are no ambiguities

32. Church, "Rhetorical Structure," 26.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ronald F. Hock, "A Support for His Old Age: Paul's Plea on Behalf of Onesimus," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 73.

in the meanings of these two words and that, in fact, πρεσβύτης always means "old man."[36] Such a self-identification could have rhetorical power, especially because in verse 10, Paul refers to Onesimus as "my child" (ἐμοῦ τέκνου) whom Paul has "begotten" (ἐγέννησα) during his imprisonment.

Many argue that Paul's reference to "begetting" Onesimus means that somehow he has brought the slave into the Christ cult, although it is likely that some other sort of "conversion" is intended, such as the possibility that Onesimus discovered "an apostolic vocation or a willingness to return home and confront the consequences of his less-than-ideal behavior."[37] This image of the "begetting" of Onesimus may remind readers of the Gospel of John 1:12-13, where we find the reference to the children "born" of God. Both passages use a form of the verb "to beget" (γεννάω). In Paul's case, we need not imagine that he is casting himself in a maternal role,[38] for this verb is often used in the sense of being a father to someone, such as in Matt 1:2-20. Paul has simply employed it metaphorically, and it accents his "old man" characterization.

Paul has thus presented himself as an imprisoned aged parent of Onesimus, his newly begotten child, and, as Paul states later, "beloved brother" of Philemon (Phlm 16). Such an image would remind readers of the social convention that children were expected to care for elderly parents, especially parents who were languishing in the miserable and foul hole that was the ancient prison.[39] Aware that Onesimus has wronged Philemon in some way, Paul has wisely and, one might say, craftily brought up the slave's name but in a manner that characterizes him as aiding the imprisoned and vulnerable apostle.

What Will Happen to Onesimus?

As mentioned, Onesimus was a typical slave name meaning "useful." Slaves were often given demeaning names in antiquity, such as Fortunatus, which means "lucky," or Achaichus, meaning "the Greek" (see 1 Cor 16:17), both of whom Paul recommends to the Corinthians. In Phlm 11, Paul plays with the slave's moniker using a pair of antonyms to contrast Onesimus's former "useless" (ἄχρηστον) state to his present

36. Ibid.

37. Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon,* ANTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 136.

38. See 1 Thess 2, where Paul casts his relationship with the Thessalonians first as a nursing mother (v. 7) and then as a father with his children (v. 11).

39. Hock, "A Support," in White and Yarbrough, *The Social World*, 78.

"useful" (εὔχρηστον) capacity both to Philemon and to Paul. This sort of utility language is a reminder that in Greco-Roman antiquity, as in many time periods, slaves were valued primarily for their productivity and use, including sexual use.

As has been recently explored by Joseph A. Marchal, it is conceivable that Paul may be not only making a pun on Onesimus's name but jokingly referring to the sexual use of the slave, as it was commonly understood that "use" (χρῆσις) referred to "sexual use" of slaves and others, in Greco-Roman antiquity.[40] If Onesimus had been a female slave and some sort of similar pun were made on her name with reference to χρῆσις, would scholars have noticed such a potential dimension earlier? At any rate, Paul is talking "about" Onesimus here as a kind of valuable object. A very productive slave was simply worth more, and slave owners would more likely "maintain" such "property" with greater care.[41] Paul's reference to Onesimus with this language reveals to what extent the apostle is simply participating in the social construction of slavery characteristic of the first century.

In Phlm 12-14, Paul makes it clear that he is sending Onesimus back, despite the fact that he would like to retain the slave in place of Philemon for his own service while imprisoned. Although Paul says that he would like to keep Onesimus with him, he would prefer not to do so without Philemon's consent, therefore giving Philemon the chance to do a "good deed" (τὸ ἀγαθόν) out of the slave master's own initiative. This "good deed" is important, as signaled already by the thanksgiving reference to "the good" (v. 6), but what is it? Here, as we know, scholars are divided, with some claiming that Paul wants Philemon to send Onesimus back to him for ongoing service[42] and others that Paul is asking for manumission.[43] Given that Paul's indication later that Onesimus will be back with Philemon forever (v. 15), verses 13 and 14 more likely function primarily as part of Paul's overall rhetoric rather than as Paul's specific request.

Paul, self-characterized as an imprisoned old man, makes it plain that he would like Onesimus to stay and assist him in prison, but he is willing

40. See Joseph A. Marchal, "The Usefulness of an Onesimus: The Sexual Use of Slaves and Paul's Letter to Philemon," *JBL* 130 (2011): 749–70.

41. Mitzi J. Smith, "Utility, Fraternity, and Reconciliation. Ancient Slavery as a Context for the Return of Onesimus," in Johnson, Noel, and Williams, *Onesimus Our Brother*, 48.

42. John Knox (*Philemon)* had this view, as discussed in my Introduction. Many scholars since Knox agree that Paul wants Philemon to send Onesimus back to him, such as Hock, "A Support," in White and Yarbrough, *The Social World*, 81.

43. For example, Sara C. Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *NTS* 33 (1987): 1–15.

to forgo this preference. As F. Forrester Church states, "it is at some cost to himself that Paul commends by his own actions the quality of selfless love he wishes to instill in Philemon."[44] In first-century Mediterranean culture where honor and shame figured so centrally, Paul has appealed to Philemon's sense of honor. Paul wants to give Philemon the chance to manifest the selfless love that Paul himself has embodied by sending Onesimus, his "own heart" (ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα), back to the slave owner. He is setting things up carefully such that Philemon will be in a position to uphold his honor and do "the good thing" once it is requested of him.

In Phlm 16, Paul asks Philemon to receive back his errant slave "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother." Paul has expressed his willingness to let Onesimus go, despite his desire to keep him, in order that such selfless behavior will be imitated by Philemon when he receives his errant slave back into his house. But what would it mean to accept Onesimus as a beloved brother? There is no language of manumission here, for the language of "more than a slave" (v. 16) does not mean that Onesimus will be set free, and Paul states in verse 15 that Philemon will have Onesimus back forever. The reference to Onesimus as a beloved brother, "both in the flesh and in the Lord," indicates that Onesimus will have some degree of identity within the community, but he will still be a slave, Philemon's slave.

Such a situation seemingly creates a dilemma, for how would Onesimus and Philemon now interact as brothers but also as slave and master?[45] Here, it is important to observe that the application of fictive kinship language to the slave did not lessen the oppressor and oppressed relationship between the master and slave.[46] Just because Onesimus is now a "beloved brother," it does not automatically follow that a change in his social status will occur. Mitzi Smith cites Orlando Patterson's magisterial study of slavery in which he indicates that the use of fictive kinship language did not reduce the oppressed/oppressor relationship between the master and slave, at least not when the adoptive claims were quasi-filial.[47] The language of "beloved brother" does not guarantee, therefore, that Onesimus would receive better treatment.

44. Church, "Rhetorical Structure," 27.

45. See John M. G. Barclay, "Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership," *NTS* 37 (1991): 161–86.

46. Smith, "Utility," in Johnson, Noel, and Williams, *Onesimus Our Brother*, 54.

47. Ibid. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1982), 63.

In addition, there is no indication within the Paul/Philemon/Onesimus triangle that Onesimus was being adopted as a true son of either Paul or Philemon. Onesimus remains a slave despite his "beloved brother" identification. In a kinship-based society such as the ancient Mediterranean, it was especially humiliating to be a slave because degradation could not be explained by an economic system or purely by the exploitation of the master. As Patterson states:

> The slave in the kin-based society had no such external explanations. His degradation sprang from something presumably innate to his very being. And the degradation heaped upon him came in little ways, sometimes minor, sometimes cutting, but with the cumulative effect of a piranha assault.[48]

Patterson explains that even in very capitalistic societies such as the antebellum United States, quasi-filial kinship language was used in master-slave relationships making it hard to distinguish, sometimes, between what were true expressions of concern and care, what were duplicitous maneuverings, and what were psychological manipulations.[49]

It is thus not surprising to read in Smith's essay that a nineteenth-century African American itinerant preacher, Zilpha Elaw, did not think that Paul was in any way exhorting the manumission of Onesimus, nor that the slave's life would necessarily be improved. As Elaw wrote: "Oh, the abominations of slavery! Though Philemon be the proprietor, and Onesimus the slave, yet every case of slavery, however lenient its afflictions and mitigated its atrocities, indicates an oppressor, the oppressed, and the oppression."[50] Smith understands Paul's letter to Philemon to reflect considerable ambiguity. On the one hand, Onesimus remains

48. Patterson, *Slavery,* 64.

49. Patterson, *Slavery,* 65. As Joseph A. Marchal ("The Usefulness," 764) points out: "Specifically, in the context of slaves and their owner-users, diminutive terms were applied to the slave so as to demean and even dehumanize the slave. As Finley warns, 'We must rid our minds of the warm overtones of the word "child" in this connection.'" See Moses Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking, 1980), 96. Marchal also points out that Paul's description of Onesimus as his "heart" (σπλάγχνα) also falls into this kinship or affection language (see Marchal, "The Usefulness," 762).

50. Zilpha Elaw, "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Ms. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]," in *Sisters of the Spirit*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 98. This text is cited by Smith, "Utility," in Johnson, Noel, and Williams, *Onesimus Our Brother*, 47.

a slave and, as such, socially marginal, while, on the other hand, the language of kinship indicates a certain degree of social integration. For Smith, the combination underlines to what degree there is tension in Paul's request for Onesimus.[51]

Thus the kinship language applied to Onesimus does not tell us very much. Yet Phlm 15 and 16 function to motivate Philemon, for although he lost Onesimus's services for a while, he will have the slave back forever as a beloved brother, "especially to me," says Paul, "but how much more to you." Paul employs exaggeration here to underscore the benefits that Philemon will receive upon the return of Onesimus.[52] In addition, Paul explicitly states that Onesimus is a beloved brother to himself and to Philemon "both in the flesh and in the Lord" (καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ; v. 16). The reference to "the Lord" signals that Paul envisages some sort of a sharing of faith between Onesimus and Philemon, but the reference to "the flesh" invokes what Peter Arzt-Grabner calls, "the human sphere."[53] Does this suggest that Paul has in mind a different sort of relationship between Philemon and his *erro* slave than they had before?

Philemon 17 supplies more clues, although admittedly, Paul's directions remain a little hazy. Here, Paul states that if Philemon considers him (Paul) his "partner" (κοινωνός), "welcome him as you would welcome me." This verse is a manifestation of the letter's climax, for here Paul asks Philemon something directly. The request is about hospitality. There were specific elements characteristic of the welcome of a returning relative or friend, as Paul seemingly was to Philemon. For example, the host would go out to welcome the guest, then invite the guest into the house where a bath, fine food, and some fresh clothes would be provided. The guest's animal would be cared for, and when the guest left, goods would be provided to assist the guest on his or her journey.[54] The welcome of Onesimus, therefore, would be an elaborate affair. Female slaves may

51. Smith, "Utility," in Johnson, Noel, and Williams, *Onesimus Our Brother*, 58.

52. Church, "Rhetorical Structure," 28.

53. Peter Arzt-Grabner, "How to Deal with Onesimus? Paul's Solution within the Frame of Ancient Legal Documentary Sources," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, ed. D. Francois Tolmie, BZNW 169 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 139.

54. Wendy J. Cotter, "'Welcome Him as You Would Welcome Me' (Philemon 17): Does Paul Call for Virtue or the Actualization of a Vision?" in *From Judaism to Christianity: Tradition and Transition. A Festschrift for Thomas H. Tobin, S.J., on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Patricia Walters, NovTSup 136 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 205–6. Cotter is building from the work of Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 103.

be involved in providing some of this hospitality, including, perhaps, comforts of a sexual nature. Again, one wonders what the dynamics of this sort of situation might have been like. How would other slaves, including women slaves, have responded to their fellow slave receiving a kind of "royal treatment"? How would they feel about having to service the returning *erro*?

Craig S. de Vos also notices the importance of thinking about the rich tradition of Mediterranean hospitality as the context for understanding this verse, observing that guests took precedence even over siblings. As de Vos states, "if in v. 16 Paul expects Philemon to treat Onesimus as his brother, in v. 17 he expects even more outrageously that Philemon ought to treat him as an honoured guest, thereby treating him better than he would a brother, a spouse or a child."[55] De Vos does not think that Paul is requesting Onesimus's manumission, which, based on studies of freed slaves in antiquity and their relationship to their former masters, would not have made a dramatic difference to Onesimus's life. Rather, Paul is expecting there to be a significant change in the relationship whereby Onesimus would be welcomed as a brother in the flesh and in the Lord and as an honored guest. This means for de Vos that Paul was actually asking for something more radical than manumission.[56]

In addition, based on the papyri evidence, Arzt-Grabner thinks that Paul could well be asking for some sort of "partnership" between the slave and his master. Paul employs the language of partnership (κοινωνός) here that had emerged back in Phlm 6 when Paul writes of "the sharing of your faith" (ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως σου). If Paul is Philemon's partner and he desires Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul, then Onesimus is now Philemon's partner too, "without any reservations."[57] The papyri indicate that the word κοινωνός was used to refer to business partners. Occasionally, slaves were appointed as managers/brokers or trusted confidants of their masters, although there is no evidence that they were called κοινωνός.[58] Paul does not refer to Onesimus by this term directly, only indirectly, but even by doing so, he is asking an unusual thing of Philemon: to make Onesimus some sort

55. Craig S. de Vos, "Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *JSNT* 82 (2001): 103.

56. de Vos, "Once a Slave," 104.

57. Arzt-Grabner, "How to Deal with Onesimus?" in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 139.

58. Ibid., 136–39.

of business partner. This would mean that Onesimus is now not only a partner in faith (πίστις);[59] he is a partner in an economic sense and may be entrusted with considerable responsibilities.

Interestingly, Phlm 18 contains some language typical of Greco-Roman and ancient Jewish business dealings: ὀφείλει ("he owes") and ἐλλόγα ("charge . . . to my account").[60] Clarice J. Martin understands the presence of the commercial allusions primarily as a means of underscoring Paul's willingness to do all that is necessary in order that his request be granted. Philemon is now free to heed Paul's directions, for Paul's willingness to pay any debts has removed any possible obstacles.[61] Philemon has no excuse! As I observed earlier, Paul uses the imperative ἐλλόγα, which supports the notion that the body of the letter has come to an end. Paul has expressed what he wants Philemon to do. Now it is up to the slave master to decide what course to take.

In Phlm 16 and 17, then, Paul asks for more than one thing. He asks that Onesimus be received home by Philemon as a brother in the flesh and in the Lord and that he be welcomed just as Philemon would welcome his partner, Paul. It follows that Paul, albeit circuitously, is requesting that Onesimus be greeted by his master as a partner, both in business and in faith, with the full hospitality that Philemon would offer Paul. Such an appeal would be unusual for such a context, which is why in the closing Paul indicates that he will soon be coming to visit.

This section of the letter remains unsettling, however. Paul may be asking for something unusual, but he also remains fully embedded in ancient ideologies of slavery, whereby one could make jokes, possibly of a sexual nature, about slaves' names and refer to them using fictive family language even though such terminology did not improve the lives of slaves but sometimes demeaned them all the more. Such treatment of people is comparable to the treatment of women in many contexts, whether they are officially enslaved or not. This is why I think that there is real tension in Paul's letter. Indeed, he desires that Onesimus be treated well and is quite possibly asking for very unusual treatment, yet he remains deeply entrenched in the ancient ideology of slavery.

59. As Arzt-Grabner ("How to Deal with Onesimus?" in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 129, 140) makes clear, in slave sale contracts, πιστός is the word used to describe a slave who is not an *erro.*

60. See Martin, "The Rhetorical Function," in Watson, *Persuasive Artistry*, 321.

61. Ibid., 336.

Philemon 19-25

The Silence of Onesimus

The Letter Closing

I concur with those who argue that the letter closing of Philemon begins in verse 19. Verses 17 and 18 have brought the body of the letter to a climax, where Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul, in other words, with hospitality. He also makes it clear that he will repay any debts owed to Philemon. Now, Paul turns to the conclusion of his letter.

Paul's Autograph

Philemon 19 is rich with rhetorical power, serving a variety of purposes for Paul. He makes it clear that he is now writing with his own hand, which he also does in other undisputed letters (1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11), and two of the disputed Pauline letters bear similar examples (Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17). In all of these texts, the autograph formula begins the closing, as it typically does in Greek papyri letters.[1] Paul presumably

1. See Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "Paul's Persuasive Power: An Epistolary Analysis of the Letter to Philemon," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, ed. D. Francois Tolmie, BZNW 169 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 53.

Philemon 19-25

[19]I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. [20]Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. [21]Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

[22]One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

[23]Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, [24]and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

[25]The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

used a secretary to write most of his letters and then shifted to his own writing at the end. He then indicates that he will repay Philemon for any financial damages caused by Onesimus. Thus Paul has shifted to his own handwriting, in part, to convey the fact that he is serious in his promise to repay; he really means it.[2] The promise also anticipates any objections that Philemon might have,[3] but it is difficult to imagine the man protesting given that Paul has spent the bulk of the letter illustrating how Philemon will gain from Paul's interaction with Onesimus and from Onesimus's return to his master.

Paul's autograph not only marks the beginning of the conclusion to the letter, it bears significant rhetorical clout. By indicating that he is writing with his own hand, Paul has either broken into the work of the amanuensis or he has decided to underscore the fact that he himself is writing the letter. Either way, Paul has authenticated the letter with his own handwriting. It is well known that Paul was literate, an ability that made him stand out in a largely illiterate society. By demonstrating his literacy through an explicit statement that he was physically writing, Paul would effectively be proving that he had a certain status. Paul was educated, and he wanted his readers to know it.[4] In addition, the fact that Paul interjects in several of his letters to proclaim that now he himself is writing is an indication that he not only is able to write but also has someone who will do the bulk of the writing for him. As Chris Keith has

2. Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, ANTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 141.

3. F. Forrester Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *HTR* 71 (1978): 29–30.

4. Chris Keith, "'In My Own Hand': Grapho-Literacy and the Apostle Paul," *Bib* 89 (2008): 54.

explained, "For persons of prestige, one mark of status was the ability to demonstrate literacy but simultaneously to avoid its use."[5] Grapho-literate people in antiquity would employ trained slaves or freedmen to write for them such that the employer could avoid the menial labor of writing. Paul has interjected to demonstrate that he can indeed write and perhaps that he is of such a level that he can avoid the bulk of the writing. Because Philemon is a short letter, the interjection may have been less effective compared to 1 Corinthians, for example, but it is a clear assertion of status.

Paul's Demands

Paul rather boldly affirms that Philemon owes him far more than money when he states that Philemon owes (προσοφείλλεις; "your owing") him even his own self (see Phlm 19). He prefaces the reference to this debt with "I say nothing" (v. 19), which is a well-known rhetorical move, "a way of mentioning something when making out you are not going to do so."[6] Paul has made it clear that Onesimus will not be indebted because Paul will pay for any damages, but Philemon owes him so much more than money. Again, commercial language appears, but in this case, Philemon has become a "metaphorical debtor,"[7] and the debt he owes Paul is his own incorporation into the church, whereby he became Paul's "brother." His debt to Paul is limitless.[8] Roy R. Jeal thinks that Paul's comment here is a "manipulative flourish" in that the image is "morally powerful for Paul and socially awkward for Philemon."[9] Paul has the power here because he has just indicated that he is willing to pay for any charges caused by Onesimus, yet Philemon owes him his own life!

In Phlm 20, Paul again likely plays on the name of Onesimus, which translates as "useful," indicating his desire for a "benefit" (ὀναίμην) from Philemon "in the Lord." Ὀναίμην is a rare optative of the verb ὀνίνημι, which refers to taking benefit or joy in something. Ignatius of Antioch

5. Ibid., 54.

6. John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, NTG (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 103.

7. Clarice J. Martin, "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon (Verse 18)," in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, ed. Duane F. Watson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 337.

8. Barclay, *Colossians*, 104.

9. Roy R. Jeal, "Blending Two Arts: Rhetorical Words, Rhetorical Pictures, and Social Formation in the Letter to Philemon," *Sino-Christian Studies* 5 (2008): 29.

later uses the word often, including in his letter to the Ephesians[10] when the bishop there was a man named Onesimus (probably not the same Onesimus referred to in Philemon). The high probability that Ignatius used the word as a pun for Onesimus's name increases the possibility that Paul is doing a similar thing here.[11]

Subsequently, Paul calls on Philemon to "refresh my heart in Christ" (ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα Χριστῷ, v. 20). Notably, Paul had referred to Onesimus as his own "heart" (σπλάγχνα) in verse 12 and had praised Philemon for the fact that he had refreshed "the hearts" (τὰ σπλάγχνα) of the saints in the thanksgiving of the letter (v. 7). Paul appears to be requesting things for himself, but, in fact, he is continuing in his plea for Onesimus. Through the use of language, specifically the reference to "heart" again, Paul has continued to associate Philemon, Onesimus, and himself together as members of the church. Philemon has already refreshed the hearts of the saints, and there is now no reason why he could refuse to refresh the heart of Paul by welcoming Onesimus as he would welcome the apostle. This is especially so given that Philemon has just been reminded that he owes Paul his own self. F. Forrester Church puts it very well: "Having established Philemon's indebtedness to him and then begged for satisfaction, Paul goes on to place full confidence in Philemon's obedience. Surely he will do even more than Paul has asked. By this, Philemon's good will, together with his good office, is assured."[12] By summoning Philemon to "refresh his heart" in Christ, Paul has made the impression that he is confident that Philemon will do the right thing; such a request therefore serves to "trump Paul's argument in a flattering and very persuasive way."[13] Philemon would be hard pressed to refuse!

Paul's complimentary tone continues in Phlm 21 where Paul again stresses that he is confident that Philemon will do as he wishes and, in fact, will do even more than Paul says. Here we meet the final demand—"obey me"—yet the optimistic tenor is maintained. Paul is confident that Philemon will do "even more" but we do not know exactly what this "more" is (v. 21). Some have wondered whether this is a subtle allusion to manumission or possibly a signal that Paul wishes for Philemon to send Onesimus back to Paul.[14] Paul's precise intent and wishes, however, are

10. See Ignatius, *Eph.* 2.2.

11. Osiek, *Philippians Philemon*, 141.

12. Church, "Rhetorical Structure," 30.

13. Ibid., 31.

14. Todd D. Still, *Philippians and Philemon* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2011), 179–80.

impossible to decipher here. Perhaps Paul wants to leave it up to Philemon to decide what the next course of action should be,[15] or perhaps the "more" is simply an afterthought. As Andries H. Snyman has observed, Paul's letter is aimed at fraternal persuasion. Therefore, Paul may want to keep things open and let Philemon make some decisions for himself. Such an approach would be more effective rhetorically.[16]

For a change, Paul provides very concrete instruction in Phlm 22, requesting that Philemon prepare a guest room for him because Paul is hoping that the prayers of the recipients of the letter, that is, "your [pl.] prayers" (τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν), will enable him to be restored to them. Here, Paul expresses his faith in the prayers of the church and implicitly his hope that he will indeed be released from prison, thereby adding an element of poignancy to the closing of the letter.[17] Paul appears to think that he will be set free relatively soon, for the introductory "one thing more" (ἅμα) just before the instruction about preparing a guest room for him "suggests in a general sense another thing to be done simultaneously,"[18] as if Paul will be arriving soon. But most significantly, Paul indicates that he wishes to visit Philemon and check up on what has transpired since Onesimus's return. By asking for a guest room or σενία, Paul is expecting full hospitality, which again indicates that he expects Onesimus to be treated with a similar welcome. Again, other slaves, including women slaves, might be called up to assist in providing hospitality for Paul. The request here may seem casual, but its importance would not be lost on Philemon. Paul will be coming to inspect the state of affairs in Philemon's house.

Final Greetings

The closing greetings, which are addressed to the singular "you," meaning Philemon, indicate that Paul has a significant group of coworkers with him, including Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (Phlm 23). These people are all mentioned in Colossians (Col 4:10-14), a letter that addresses an additional worker, "Jesus who is called Justus" (Col 4:11). Some have proposed that this name appears in Phlm 23. Rather than "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus," it could

15. Osiek, *Philippians Philemon*, 142.

16. Andries H. Snyman, "Persuasion in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 20 (2009): 191.

17. Church, "Rhetorical Structure," 31.

18. Osiek, *Philippians Philemon*, 142.

be "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ, Jesus." Although all of the surviving manuscripts contain the former reading, with "Jesus" in the dative case, it is possible that a change was made early on by a scribe who just assumed that it should read "in Christ Jesus." On the other hand, would Paul not have noticed the strong potential for confusion if he had placed "Christ, Jesus" side by side?[19]

The only other mention of Epaphras is in Col 1:7 and 4:12. In Philemon, Paul calls him a "fellow prisoner" (συνωαιχμάλωτός), a term also used of Andronicus, a man, and Junia, a woman, in Rom 16:7, and Aristarchus is referred to this way by the author of Colossians (4:10). The latter figure appears as a companion of Paul in Acts (19:29; 20:4; 27:2), while Demas emerges elsewhere as someone who has abandoned Paul and gone to Thessalonica in 2 Tim 4:10, while in the *Acts of Paul* 12, he shows up as one of Paul's opponents. Mark and Luke are presumably the same as those mentioned in other New Testament passages, namely, the Mark who is also known as John (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37, 39) and Luke who is an associate of Paul's (2 Tim 4:11). The precise nature of these men's relationships to Paul is not clear in Philemon; they are simply described as "my fellow workers" (συνεργοί μου, Phlm 23), as are various other male and female associates of Paul like Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3) and Urbanus (Rom 16:9). In this particular instance, no women coworkers of Paul are mentioned, but this may simply be coincidence since female benefactors and coworkers appear elsewhere in his correspondence (e.g., Rom 16:1-15).

Paul ends his letter with a final blessing that is quite representative of Pauline letter closings. He extends a wish for "grace" (χάρις) not only to Philemon but to all of the recipients, as he did at the beginning of the letter (Phlm 3). Rather than the more limited "with you," found, for example, in 1 Thess 5:28, Paul ends as he does in Gal 6:18 and Phil 4:23 with the fuller phrase of "with your spirit" (μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν).

Ongoing Questions

Paul's letter to Philemon is daring, for clearly Paul is doing his best to persuade, even manipulate, Philemon into taking an action that may go against some of Philemon's own interests and inclinations. Paul desires Philemon to receive Onesimus as a partner in faith and as Philemon

19. Ibid., 143.

would receive Paul, including all the hospitality and welcome that such a reception would entail. It could be Paul's hope, as Arzt-Grabner has suggested, that Philemon would make Onesimus a business partner of some sort. Such an arrangement between master and slave had precedent within the ancient world.

There is no clear demand for manumission; nor, contrary to the arguments of many scholars, is there an obvious desire that Onesimus be sent back to Paul to assist him. The letter remains ambiguous on these matters.[20] What we do know is that Onesimus, the *erro* slave, is being sent back, and Paul wants to ensure that he be treated well. The apostle not only carefully crafts a letter that he hopes will persuade Philemon but also anticipates that Apphia, Archippus, and others are looking over Philemon's shoulder. Given that Apphia holds considerable prestige as "our sister" (Phlm 1), it may be that Paul is counting on her watchful eye and sphere of influence to ensure that Philemon fulfills Paul's wishes. At any rate, these members of the church, as well as others, could further serve Paul's interests by pressuring Philemon to treat Onesimus hospitably. In addition, Paul will soon be arriving for a visit, which would give Philemon additional incentive to follow through with Paul's request.

But we never hear about what Onesimus might have wanted, and Paul reveals no interest in consulting with the slave. Paul refers to Onesimus in an affectionate manner, which, as I have shown, was not an unusual way to speak of or to slaves in Greco-Roman antiquity or at other points in the history of slavery, as Patterson and Smith have reminded us. The letter tells us nothing of what Onesimus's life was like. As a slave, was it an insufferable existence, subject to daily beatings and humiliations, as slaves both in the Roman Empire and in subsequent centuries have endured? Was Onesimus treated as a simple tool or commodity, as most slaves were? We simply do not know what sort of life he led and whether he was actually impressed by Paul at all. Many women readers of Philemon may see themselves, to some extent, in Onesimus. Yes, perhaps someone is looking out for them, but they are not given an opportunity to speak. Their lives and futures remain in the hands of others, whether those others seek good or ill.

We also remain ignorant as to how the letter was received. Some think that because Philemon was preserved, it must have been successful. But

20. Barclay (*Colossians*, 113–19) offers a concise summary of perspectives regarding Paul's overall intent, but he concludes that, in the end, Paul "did not know what to recommend" (116).

who preserved it? Perhaps Philemon kept the letter even if he did not heed it. Perhaps he ignored Paul's requests, as Carolina Dionco suggested earlier. Perhaps Onesimus did not receive a warm reception or the recognition of being a partner in faith and finance. And, even if he was received well, welcomed as a brother in Christ, and given various responsibilities, how much did these things actually change his life as a slave over the long term? Matthew V. Johnson rejects outright the idea that somehow brotherhood could exist between the slave and the master. For him, such an idea is "nonsense . . . [and] predicated on the traditional assumption in the Christian tradition that the only true slavery is spiritual slavery."[21] For Johnson, like the voices of millions throughout history, Onesimus's voice remains "occluded" and the "gravitas of the slaves' silence refracts the passing of all other light, including Paul's glowing recommendations for brotherhood and acceptance on the part of the slaveholding Philemon."[22] Paul may have eloquent things to say about faith, love, and siblingship, but the fact that Onesimus remains silent and in chains in various ways mars the beauty of the apostle's words.

In addition, it is not clear how the letter came to be accepted in the Pauline letter collection and subsequently in the canon of the New Testament. Did it tag along with Colossians because of the similar names in both letters? The author of Colossians, likely a pseudonymous letter, must have had a copy of Philemon and used the names from the latter while Col 4 was composed. John Chrysostom, a defender of the letter to Philemon, was aware that some did not want to include it as many Christians did not see the theological value of the letter. He fought for its inclusion, in part, because he thought that it demonstrated, as I discussed earlier, Paul's sanctioning of legal structures, namely, slavery and the return of a fugitive slave.

Despite his concern for the welfare of Onesimus, Paul does not challenge the institution of slavery or even signal an interest in hearing the voice of Onesimus. There is also no indication that the letter caused early interpreters to question slavery. The argument that slavery was so fundamental to Roman society and economy that it could not be challenged without creating social chaos does not justify the passive acceptance of

21. Matthew V. Johnson, "Onesimus Speaks. Diagnosing the Hys/Terror of the Text," in *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon,* ed. Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 95.

22. Ibid., 95.

this deeply violent institution. There are many pervasive institutions in our time that serve economic interests on a large scale, such as exploitative labor practices, but this does not mean that we should not challenge them. As Pieter Botha has written, appeals to the argument that Paul was simply a man of his time, "when slavery was seen as 'normal,' are *extremely* problematic. One ends up with ethical inconsistencies (after all, we do not excuse other atrocities such as cannibalism and apartheid on the grounds that they are, or were, 'justifiable and normal' in their contexts)."[23] Some ancients *did* challenge slavery and proclaimed it contrary to nature, even though they did not succeed in overthrowing it, at least not on a broad scale.[24]

Those who perceive Paul as sowing the seeds of change on an issue such as slavery will be disappointed. Subsequent letters written in Paul's name, including Colossians and the Pastoral Epistles, uphold slavery, as did the Christian church, for centuries. Clearly the pseudonymous writers thought that it would be appropriate to attach Paul's names to letters that unequivocally maintained this hierarchal and brutal institution. Some, as we have seen, read this letter otherwise and did not grant that something by Paul could be promoting such an inhumane practice. The black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who struggled to prevent the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, thought that Paul's letter to Philemon was used to promote the slave law simply because it was *interpreted* that way, not because that is what it intended. His response to such interpretation was to hold the Bible more closely to his chest, read it more carefully, and "prove from its pages that it is on the side of liberty—and not the side of slavery."[25] In contrast, the nineteenth-century preacher Zilpha Elaw did not perceive Paul to be in support of freedom for Onesimus or for improvement in his life at all. There are undoubtedly many reasons why these two people reacted differently to

23. Pieter J. J. Botha, "Hierarchy and Obedience: The Legacy of the Letter to Philemon," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, ed. D. Francis Tolmie, BZNW 169 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 271.

24. John M. G. Barclay, "Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership," *NTS* 37 (1991): 177 n. 70.

25. Frederick Douglass, "Speech in New York, New York, 12 May 1859," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Vol. 3: 1855–1863*, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 258, as cited in J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 178.

the text, but it is not inconceivable that gender was a factor in shaping their perspectives.

John M. G. Barclay writes that Paul's letter to Philemon is "not only intriguing and beguiling, but also somewhat disturbing."[26] It is a fascinating missive full of rhetorical finesse, as I have attempted to demonstrate briefly. Paul's letter to Philemon did not justify returning runaway slaves to their masters, and it did, I think, advocate for the good treatment and acceptance of Onesimus, but it was not a harbinger of social change. Through the centuries, interpretations of Philemon, in addition to readings of other biblical texts, have contributed to the miseries of millions. We can appreciate Paul's style and many of his ideas, but when it comes to eliminating slavery, many forms of which persist to the present day, we must turn to other texts and other ideas for our inspiration.

26. Barclay, *Colossians*, 126.

Conclusion

Paul's letter to Philemon refers to a woman, Apphia, once, and she does not receive extended attention. Apphia, "our sister" (v. 2), likely had a significant role in the church, however, and thus Paul includes her in the opening address of his letter, hoping that she will exert her influence as Philemon decides how to receive Onesimus back into the household. Apphia is another example of the importance of women in these fledgling churches, women who provided not only much needed economic support (e.g., Phoebe in Rom 16:1-2) but perhaps guidance and leadership when it came to difficult issues. Apphia may well have been an ally of Paul with the ability to pressure Philemon to welcome Onesimus with generous hospitality and to entrust him as a partner in both business and faith.

As stated in my introduction, the notion of a feminist commentary includes attention to questions of social justice, not only with regard to women, but for all who experience marginalization, regardless of gender. Although it is not evident that Paul thought that the central issue in his letter to Philemon was slavery, many (but not all) subsequent readers of the letter have focused on that topic, using the document either to justify slaveholding and the return of fugitive slaves to their owners or sometimes to argue for the abolition of slavery because they thought that Paul was advocating for Onesimus's freedom. Sadly, the former interpretation has predominated throughout history, and thousands of men, women, and children have suffered and died because Christian slave traders and slave owners thought that the Bible sanctioned the institution of slavery.

As Demetrius K. Williams has explained, most African American churches have understandably avoided Paul's letter to Philemon because of its long association with slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law. In addition, Carolina Dionco points out that, for many Filipinos struggling against slavery both in the past and in the present, Paul's letter to Philemon has not been a source of support. For Williams and for others, the hypothesis that Paul's letter to Philemon is not about slavery at all but about Paul's intervention between two estranged biological brothers, Onesimus and Philemon, is deeply compelling, for it opens up the possibility that this letter can be meaningful and a source of reconciliation for many.

Although slavery is now officially illegal, it has had enduring impact and continues to exist in hideous forms. Contexts in which ongoing economic and social inequalities and injustices thrive become incubators for slavery in a variety of forms. According to the Borgen Project,[1] approximately 29.8 million people live in slavery today. Of these 29.8 million, 78% are enslaved for labor, while 22% serve as sex slaves. Altogether, 55% of these people are women and girls, and 26% are children under the age of eighteen. No continent is free from slavery, including North America, where approximately 60,000 persons are victims of slavery in the United States alone.

The Bible, including Paul's letter to Philemon, has played a significant role in fostering and sustaining such menaces but also, paradoxically, in challenging them. Obviously, much depends on how and by whom the interpretation is done. This discussion of Philemon has ultimately taken a historical approach, using feminist lenses, and while I grant that Paul is making a clear effort to ensure the good treatment of Onesimus, I argue that the letter does not, in the end, challenge what was and is an insidious practice. Historically, readers of the texts on both sides of the slavery debate have recognized this disturbing feature of Philemon. Such recognition is disheartening and disappointing but reminds us that the biblical texts are the products of limited human beings. As such, we have much to learn from them, both positive and negative, but they are not the entire story. Like billions of other men, women, and children, Onesimus deserved to have his voice heard, and we must work for a world in which those who have shared his plight, in any form, will speak loudly and freely.[2]

1. Kelley Calkins, "10 Statistics on Slavery Today," *The Borgen Project*, n.p., 4 February, 2014, The Borgern Project, http://borgenproject.org/10-statistics-on-slavery-today/.

2. Many thanks to Zacharie Klassen for research assistance during the writing of this commentary.

Philippians Works Cited

Articulación Ecuménica Latinoamericana de Pastoral Indígena. "Sumak Kawsay y Vida Plena." Memoria Borrador, Convocatoria al VII Encuentro Continental de Teologia India. Ecuador, October 2013. http://www.padrenello.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/VII-Encontro-Continental-de-Teologia-%C3%8Dndia-Ebook-em-Espanhol.pdf?iframe=true&width=90%&height=90%.

Alexander, Loveday. "Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians." *JSNT* 37 (1989): 87–101.

Alzugarat, Alfredo. *Trincheras de papel: dictadura y literatura carcelaria en Uruguay*. Montevideo: Trilce, 2007.

Ana, Marcos. *Decidme cómo es un árbol: Memoria de la prisión y la vida*. Barcelona: Umbriel, 2007.

Balz, Horst, and Gerhard Schneider, eds. *Diccionario Exegético del Nuevo Testamento.* Vol. 2. Translated by Constantino Ruiz-Garrido. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1996.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Nicolás Rosa. Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1980.

———. *S/Z: An Essay*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975.

Benveniste, Emile. *Problemas de lingüística general*. Translated by Juan Almela. Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1971.

Bockmuehl, Markus. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. BNTC. London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Vol. 8. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

———. *Resistencia y sumisión. Cartas y apuntes desde el cautiverio*. Translated by Constantino Ruiz-Garrido. Salamanca: Sígueme, 2008.

Brown, Colin. "Ernst Lohmeyer's Kyrios Jesus." In *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, edited by Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998.

Camarero, Jesús. *Intertextualidad: Redes de textos y literaturas transversales en dinámica intercultural*. Pensamiento Crítico. Barcelona: Anthropos, 2008.

Carter, Warren. *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001.

Cassidy, Richard J. *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul*. New York: Crossroad, 2001.

Castelli, Elizabeth A. *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power*. Nashville, TN: Westminster John Knox, 1991.

Clark Wire, Antoinette. *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

Cortés Copete, J. M. "Nerón libera Grecia." In *Epigrafía griega*, edited by J. M. Cortés Copete. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1999.

Cousar, Charles B. *Philippians and Philemon: A Commentary*. NTL. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

Croato, Severino. *Liberación y Libertad: Pautas hermenéuticas.* Lima: CEP, 1987.

De Samosata Cronio, Luciano. *Obras II. Sobre la muerte de Peregrino.* Madrid: Gredos, 1990.

Eco, Umberto. *Obra abierta.* Translated by Roser Berdague. Barcelona: Ariel, 1979.

Elliott, Neil. *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

Fee, Gordon D. *Comentario de la Epístola a los Filipenses*. Colección teológica contemporánea. Translated by Dora González and Ismael López. Barcelona: CLIE, 2004.

Fowl, Stephen. "Christology and Ethics in Philippians 2:5-11." In *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, edited by Ralph and P. Martin Brian J. Dodd. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1988.

Frei Betto (Carlos Alberto Libanio Cristo). *Cartas da prisão 1967–1973*. Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 2008.

Gaspar, Karl. *How Long? Prison Reflections of Karl Gaspar.* Edited by Helen Graham and Breda Noonan. Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1985.

Hillesum, Etty. *El corazón pensante de los barracones: Cartas*. Barcelona: Anthropos, 2001.

Horsley, Richard A., ed. *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997.

Houlden, J. L. *Paul's Letters from Prison*. PNTC. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.

Josephus, Flavius. *The Antiquities of the Jews*. Translated by William Whiston. www.gutenberg.org. EBook #2848.

Kahl, Brigitte. *Galatians Re-imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

Koperski, Veronica. "Feminist Concerns and the Authorial Readers in Philippians." *LS* 17 (1992): 269–92.

———. *The Knowledge of Christ Jesus My Lord: The High Christology of Philippians 3:7-11*. CBET. Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996.

Loh, I-Jin, and Eugene A. Nida. *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1977.

Lohmeyer, Ernst. *Die Briefe an die Philipper, Kolosser und an Philemon*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964.

López, Davina C. *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

Louw, J. P., and Eugene A. Nida, eds. "μνημονεύω." In *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1999.

Lucian, *Obras ll: Sobre la muerte de Peregrino*. Madrid: Gredos, 1990.

Marchal, Joseph A. *Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul's Letter to the Philippians.* Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006.

———. *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender, and Empire in the Study of Paul.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

Martin, Ralph P., and Brian J. Dodd, eds. *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998.

Navia Velasco, Carmiña. "Unidad en un sueño común: A propósito de la carta de Pablo a las mujeres de la iglesia de Filipos." Letter to autor. Cali, Colombia. March 30, 2014.

Nelson Mandela Foundation. *A Prisoner in the Garden: Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive*, 1964. Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2005.

Oakes, Peter. *Philippians: From People to Letter*. SNTSMS 110. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Osiek, Carolyn. "Philippians." In S*earching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Vol. 2. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

———. *Philippians, Philemon*. ANTC. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000.

Portefaix, Lilian. *Sisters Rejoice: Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as Seen by First-Century Philippian Women*. ConBET 20. Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1988.

Reumann, John. *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

Richter Reimer, Ivoni. "Recordar, transmitir, actuar: Mujeres en los comienzos del cristianismo." *RIBLA* 22 (1996): 43–57.

———. *Vida das mulheres na sociedade e na Igreja: Uma exegese feminista de Atos dos Apóstolos*. São Leopoldo: Paulinas, 1995.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Teoría de la Interpretación: Discurso y excedente de sentido*. Translated by Graciela Mones Nicolau. Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1999.

Sallustio. *La conjuración de Catilina*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1986.

Santos Yanguas, Narciso Vicente. "Acusaciones de alta traición en Roma en la época de Tiberio." *Memorias de historia antigua* 11–12 (1990–1991): 169–98.

Schnelle, Undo. *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

———. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. London: SCM Press, 1983.

———, ed. *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*. Vol. 2. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

———. *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.

Schütrumpf, Jörn, ed. *Letters from Prison to Sophie Liebknecht: July 1916–October 1918*. Translated by Eden and Cedar Paul. London: Socialist Book Center, 1946; Anarcho-communist Institute, 2014.

———. *Rosa Luxemburg o el precio de la libertad*. Berlin: Karl Dietz Berlin, 2007.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992.

Scroggs, Robin. "Paul the Prisoner: Political Asceticism in the Letter to the Philippians." In *Asceticism and the New Testament*, edited by Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.

Serrano, Neila. "Mi experiencia en la cárcel a la luz de Filipenses." Interview with the author. Medellin, Colombia. September 2013.

Silva, Moisés. *Philippians*. BECNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.

Standhartinger, Angela. "Aus der Welt eines Gefangenen: Die Kommunikationsstruktur des Philipperbriefs im Spiegel seiner Abfassungssituation." *NovT* 55 (2013): 140–67.

———. "Die paulinische Theologie im Spannungsfeld römisch-imperialer Machtpolitik: Eine neue Perspecktive auf Paulus, kritisch geprüft anhand des Philipperbrief." *Religion, Politik und Gewalt*. Kongressband des XII Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie. Berlin: Güthersloher Verlagshause, 2005.

———. "'Join in Imitating Me': Towards an Interpretation of Philippians 3." *NTS* 54 (2008): 417–35.

Tamez, Elsa. *Contra toda condena*: *La justificación por la fe desde los excluidos*. San Jose: DEI, 1991.

———. *Luchas de poder en los orígenes del cristianismo: Un estudio de la Carta de 1 Timoteo*. Santander: Sal Terrae, 2005.

Thurston, Bonnie B., and Judith M. Ryan. *Philippians and Philemon*. Edited by Daniel J. Harrington. SP 10. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009.

Vaage, Leif E., and Vincent L. Wimbush, eds. *Asceticism and the New Testament*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.

Wansink, Craig S. *Chained in Christ*: *The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments*. JSNTSup 130. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996.

Wengst, Klaus. *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*. London: SCM Press, 1987.

Williams, Demetrius K. "Philippians." In *Global Bible Commentary*, edited by Daniel Patte. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004.

Williams, Dolores S. "Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption." In *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, edited by Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.

Witherington, Ben, III. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011.

Colossians Works Cited

Barfield, Raymond. *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Bourgeault, Cynthia. *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*. New York: Cowley Publications, 2004.

D'Angelo, Mary Rose. "Colossians." Pages 313–24 in *Searching the Scriptures*: *A Feminist Commentary*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Vol. 2. New York: Crossroad, 1984.

Dunn, James D. G. *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGCT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.

Elliott, E. N. *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright, on This Important Subject*. Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott & Loomis, 1860.

Faber, Roland. *God as Poet of the World: Exploring Process Theologies.* Translated by Douglas W. Stott. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008.

Forte, Bruno. *Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics.* Translated by David Glenday and Paul McPartlan. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008.

Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.

Gorman, Michael. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004.

Grieb, A. Kathleen. *The Story of Romans: A Narrative of God's Righteousness.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002.

Hooker, Morna D. "Were There False Teachers in Colossae?" Pages 315–32 in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, edited by Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo." Pages 155–56 in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, edited by Catherine Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Horrell, David G. *Greening Paul: Reading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis.* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010.

Johnson, E. Elizabeth. "Colossians." Pages 585–87 in *Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley. 3rd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012.

Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Reading of the Communion of Saints.* New York: Continuum, 1998.

Jones, Alan. *Journey into Christ.* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977.

Keefe-Perry, L. Callid. "Toward the Heraldic: A Theopoetic Response to Monorthodoxy." Pages 142–58 in *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness*, edited by John D. Caputo. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

———. *Way to Water.* Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014.

Keesmaat, Sylvia. "Colossians." In *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, edited by Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David Sánchez. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

Keller, Catherine. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. London: Routledge, 2003.

———. *On the Mystery.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

———. "Theopoetics and the Pluri-verse." In *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness*, edited by John D. Caputo. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

Kittredge, Cynthia Briggs. *Community and Authority: The Rhetoric of Obedience in the Pauline Tradition*. HTS. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999.

———. "Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies." Pages 117–33 in *Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, edited by Joseph A. Marchal. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

———. "Rethinking Authorship in the Letters of Paul." Pages 318–33 in *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, edited by Shelly Matthews, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and Melanie Johnson Debaufre. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003.

Lincoln, Andrew T. "The Household Code and Wisdom Mode of Colossians." *JSNT* 21 (October 1999): 93–112.

———. "The Spiritual Wisdom of Colossians in the Context of Greco-Roman Spiritualities." Pages 213–14 in *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually*, edited by Andrew T. Lincoln, Gordon McConville, and Lloyd K. Pietersen. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013.

Lohse, Eduard. *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.* Translated by William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris. Edited by Helmut Koester. Hermenia. Vol. 65. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

Maier, Harry O. "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire." *JSNT* 27 (March 2005): 323–49.

MacDonald, Margaret Y. *Colossians and Ephesians.* Edited by Daniel J. Harrington. SP 17. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000.

May, Melanie. *A Body Knows: A Theopoetics of Death and Resurrection.* New York: Continuum, 1995.

McFague, Sallie. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.

———. *Speaking in Parables.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975.

Merton, Thomas. *Contemplative Prayer.* New York: Doubleday, 1996.

Mesle, C. Robert. *Process Theology.* St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993.

Miller, David L. "Theopoetry or Theopoetics?" *CrossCurrents* 60 (March 2010): 6–23.

Nickelsburg, George W. E. *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

Richards, M. C. "Ordeal by Fire: Evolution of Person." In *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person.* 2nd ed. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation.* Boston: Beacon, 1984.

———. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. 10th ed. New York: Crossroad, 2002.

———. *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

———. *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.

Standhartinger, Angela. "Colossians: The Origin of the Table of Household Duties." Pages 796–809 in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, translated by Everett R. Kalin. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012.

Sumney, Jerry L. *Colossians: A Commentary.* NTL. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008.

Tanzer, Sarah J. "Ephesians." Pages 336–37 in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Vol. 2. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

Tinsley, Annie. *A Postcolonial African American Re-Reading of Colossians: Identity, Reception, and Interpretation under the Gaze of Empire.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.

Walsh, Brian J., and Sylvia C. Keesmaat. *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004.

Wilder, Amos Niven. *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination.* Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 1976.

Wire, Antoinette. *The Corinthian Woman Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

Witherington, Ben, III. *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.

Philemon Works Cited

Aquinas, Thomas. *Commentaries on St. Paul's Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*. Translated by Chrysostom Baer. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2007.

Arterbury, Andrew. *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005.

Arzt-Grabner, Peter. "How to Deal with Onesimus? Paul's Solution within the Frame of Ancient Legal Documentary Sources." Pages 113–42 in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, edited by D. Francois Tolmie. BZNW 169. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.

———. "'I Was Intending to Visit You, But . . .': Clauses Explaining Delayed Visits and Their Importance in Papyrus Letters and in Paul." Pages 220–31 in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, edited by Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias. London: T & T Clark, 2009.

———. "Onesimus *erro*: Zur Vorgeschichte des Philemonbriefes." *ZNW* 95 (2004): 131–43.

Atkins, Robert. "Contextual Interpretation of the Letter to Philemon in the United States." Pages 205–21 in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, edited by D. Francois Tolmie. BZNW 169. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.

Barclay, John M. G. *Colossians and Philemon*. NTG. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997.

———. "Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership." *NTS* 37 (1991): 161–86.

Barnes, Albert. *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*. Philadelphia: Perkins and Purvis, 1846.

Bartchy, S. Scott. "Philemon, Epistle to." *ABD* 5 (1992): 305–10.

Beavis, Mary Ann. "Report on Wisdom Commentary *Hebrews* Volume." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Baltimore, MD. November 2013.

Bieberstein, Sabine. "Disrupting the Normal Reality of Slavery: A Feminist Reading of the Letter to Philemon." *JSNT* 70 (2000): 105–16.

———. "Philemon: A Reading under Apphia's Critical Eyes." Pages 848–56 in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012.

Botha, Pieter J. J. "Hierarchy and Obedience: The Legacy of the Letter to Philemon." Pages 251–71 in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, edited by D. Francois Tolmie. BZNW 169. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.

Brooten, Bernadette. *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*. BJS 36. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982.

Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament.* ABRL. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians.* NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984.

Calkins, Kelley. "10 Statistics on Slavery Today." No pages. *The Borgen Project*. February 4, 2014. The Borgen Project. http://borgenproject.org/10-statistics-on-slavery-today/.

Callahan, Allen Dwight. *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon*. The New Testament in Context. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997.

———. "John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Response to Margaret Mitchell." *HTR* 88 (1995): 149–56.

———. "Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative *Argumentum*." *HTR* 86 (1993): 357–76.

Calvin, John. *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*. Vol. 10: *2 Corinthians and Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. Translated by T. A. Smail. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.

Church, F. Forrester. "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon." *HTR* 71 (1978): 18–33.

Constantino, Renato. *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*. Manila: Tala Publishing Services, 1975.

Cotter, Wendy J. "'Welcome Him as You Would Welcome Me' (Philemon 17): Does Paul Call for Virtue or the Actualization of a Vision?" Pages 185–206 in *From Judaism to Christianity: Tradition and Transition; A Festschrift for Thomas H. Tobin, S.J., on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, edited by Patricia Walters. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

———. "Women's Authority Roles in Paul's Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?" *NovT* 36 (1994): 350–72.

Deissmann, Adolf. *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World.* Rev. ed. Translated by L. R. M. Strachan. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927.

de Vos, Craig S. "Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul's Letter to Philemon." *JSNT* 82 (2001): 89–105.

Douglass, Frederick. *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates and Interviews*. Vol. 3: *1855–1863*. Edited by John W. Blassingame. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985.

Dunn, James D. G. *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.

Elaw, Zilpha. "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Ms. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]." Pages 49–160 in *Sisters of the Spirit*, edited by William L. Andrews. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Elliott, E. N. *Cotton Is King and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe and Cartwright, on This Important Subject*. Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbot and Loomis, 1860.

Elliott, Scott S. "'Thanks, but no Thanks': Tact, Persuasion, and the Negotiation of Power in Paul's Letter to Philemon." *NTS* 57 (2011): 51–64.

Fee, Gordon D. "History as Context for Interpretation." Pages 10–32 in *The Act of Bible Reading: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Elmer Dyck. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

Felder, Cain Hope. "The Letter to Philemon: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Pages 881–906 in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck. Vol. 11. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000.

Finley, Moses. *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*. New York: Viking, 1980.

Fiore, Benjamin. "Christian Kinship in the Paraenesis of Philemon." Pages 246–52 in *The Impartial God: Essays in Biblical Studies in Honor of Jouette M. Bassler*, edited by Calvin J. Roetzel and Robert L. Foster. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Letter to Philemon*. AB 34C. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Fox, Everett. *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation, Introduction, Commentary and Notes*. New York: Schocken Books, 1995.

Geller, Barbara. "The Letter of Paul to Philemon." Pages 402–4 in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament New Revised Standard Version*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Glancy, Jennifer A. *Slavery in Early Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Harrill, J. Albert. "Review of *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* by Allen Dwight Callahan." *CBQ* 60 (1998): 575–79.

———. *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

Harris, William V. *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Hock, Ronald F. "A Support for His Old Age: Paul's Plea on Behalf of Onesimus." Pages 67–81 in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, edited by L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

Hoffman, Anne Golomb. "Embodiments: An Introduction." *Prooftexts* 20 (2000): 1–11.

Jeal, Roy R. "Blending Two Arts: Rhetorical Words, Rhetorical Pictures, and Social Formation in the Letter to Philemon." *Sino-Christian Studies* 5 (2008): 9–38.

Jerome. *St. Jerome's Commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon*. Translated by Thomas P. Scheck. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

Johnson, Matthew V., James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams, eds. *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

Johnson, Matthew V. "Onesimus Speaks: Diagnosing the Hys/Terror of the Text." Pages 91–100 in *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, edited by Matthew K. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

Keith, Chris. "'In My Own Hand': Grapho-Literacy and the Apostle Paul." *Bib* 89 (2008): 39–58.

Kim, Chan-Hie. *Form and Structure of the Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation*. SBLDS 4. Missoula, MT: Scholar's Press, 1972.

Kloppenborg, John S., and Richard S. Ascough. *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations and Commentary*. BZNW 181. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011.

Knox, John. *Philemon among the Letters of Paul*. New York: Abingdon, 1935.

Lampe, Peter. "Keine 'Sklavenflucht' des Onesimus." *ZNW* 76 (1985): 135–37.

Lewis, Lloyd A. "An African American Appraisal of the Philemon-Paul-Onesimus Triangle." Pages 233–46 in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Cain Hope Felder. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

Lohse, Eduard. *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.* Translated by William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris. Edited by Helmut Koester. Hermenia. Vol. 65. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. Vol. 29: *Lectures on Titus, Philemon and Hebrews*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1968.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years.* New York: Penguin, 2009.

Malina, Bruce J., and John J. Pilch. *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

Marchal, Joseph A. "The Usefulness of an Onesimus: The Sexual Use of Slaves and Paul's Letter to Philemon." *JBL* 130 (2011): 749–70.

Martin, Clarice J. "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon (Verse 18)." Pages 321–37 in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, edited by Duane F. Watson. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991.

Meltzer, Milton. *Slavery: A World History*. Rev. ed. Boston: Da Capo Press, 1993.

Mitchell, Margaret M. "John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look." *HTR* 88 (1995): 135–48.

Noel, James A. "Nat Is Black: The Return of the Re/Oppressed in Philemon." Pages 59–90 in *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, edited by Matthew K. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

Osiek, Carolyn. *Philippians, Philemon*. ANTC. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000.

Patrologia graeca. Edited by J. P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1886.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Perkinson, James W. "Enslaved by the Text: The Uses of Philemon." Pages 121–41 in *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, edited by Matthew K. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

Raboteau, Albert. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Ruden, Sarah. *Paul among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*. New York: Image Books, 2010.

Seesengood, Robert Paul. *Paul: A Brief History*. Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2010.

Setzer, Claudia, and David A. Sheffernan, eds. *The Bible and American Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011.

Smith, Mitzi J. "Utility, Fraternity, and Reconciliation: Ancient Slavery as a Context for the Return of Onesimus." Pages 47–58 in *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, edited by Matthew K. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

Snyman, Andries H. "Persuasion in Paul's Letter to Philemon." *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 20 (2009): 178–93.

Still, Todd D. *Philippians and Philemon*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2011.

Stowe, Harriett Beecher. *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1854.

Stowers, Stanley K. *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. LEC 5. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1986.

Stuart, Moses. *Conscience and the Constitution*. Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1850.

Tolmie, D. Francis, ed. *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*. BZNW 169. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.

———. "Tendencies in the Research on the Letter to Philemon since 1980." Pages 1–27 in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, edited by D. Francois Tolmie. BZNW 169. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.

Wansink, Craig S. *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments.* JSNTSup 130. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996.

Weima, Jeffrey A. D. "Paul's Persuasive Prose: An Epistolary Analysis of the Letter to Philemon." Pages 29–60 in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, edited by D. Francois Tolmie. BZNW 169. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.

White, John L. "The Structural Analysis of Philemon: A Point of Departure in the Form of the Pauline Letter." SBLSP 1 (1971): 1–47.

Williams, Demetrius K. "African American Approaches: Re-humanizing the Reader against Racism and Reading through Experience." Pages 155–73 in *Studying Paul's Letters*: *Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, edited by Joseph Marchal. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

———. "'No Longer as a Slave': Reading the Interpretation History of Paul's Epistle to Philemon." Pages 11–45 in *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, edited by Matthew K. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

Wilson, Andrew. "The Pragmatics of Politeness and Pauline Epistolography: A Case Study of the Letter to Philemon." *JSNT* 48 (1992): 107–19.

Wimbush, Vincent L. "'We Will Make Our Own Text': An Alternative Orientation to Interpretation." Pages 43–53 in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, edited by Brian Blount et al. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

Winter, Sara C. "Paul's Letter to Philemon." *NTS* 33 (1987): 1–15.

———. "Philemon." Pages 301–12 in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Vol. 2. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

Wright, N. T. *Paul and the Faithful Witness of God.* Book 1. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.

Index of Scripture References

Genesis
1:26-27 181
45:5 206

Exodus
3:7 234
18:20 144
19:6 142

Leviticus
11:44 142

Deuteronomy
13:4-5 144
23:15 224

2 Kings
19:30 145

Proverbs
8:1-36 150
8:31 150

Job
13:15 60
13:16 60

Psalms
5:5 90
5:8-9 90

Isaiah
5:1-7 145
37:30 145

Daniel
12:3 80

Hosea
9:10-17 145

Sirach
24 150

Wisdom
6–9 150

Matthew
1:2-20 245
7:17-19 145
25:31-46 49
27:12-14 62

Mark
7:8 170
10:21 234
10:41-45 49
10:43 74
10:45 146
13:11 59

Luke
1:46-55 146
2 53

John
1:1-18 149
1:12-13 245

Acts 196
2 197
5:37, 39 194
12:12, 25 194, 258
13:13 194
15:37 258
15:39 258
16 12
16:1-3 237
16:1-5 141

16:11-24 7
16:11-40 19
16:13-15 4, 40, 105
16:15 8, 19, 105, 116
16:16-21 105
16:19 7
16:20-21 7
16:20-24 68
16:22-24 8, 16, 17, 114
16:23-24 121
16:40 7, 40, 105, 116
17:7 13
17:6-9 16
18:12-16 16
19:23-41 16
19:29 194, 258
20:4 194, 258
21:31 16
21:33 16
21:38 16
22:24 16
22:24-30 16
22:25-29 16
22:30 16
22–24 16
23:1 68
24:26 37
24:26–27:1, 41-43 16
25:10-12 17
27:1-2 17
27:2 194, 258
27:42-44 17
28:16 17
28:30 16, 17
28:30-31 17

Romans 133, 195
1:1 38, 211
1:16-17 157
1:17 91
1:18 48
1:18-32 157
2:16 49
2:29 91
3:21 146
5:1-5 241
5:1-11 157
6:1-14 146
6:1-23 147
6:3 170
6:4 144
6:8 170, 171
6:12-14 146
7:4-5 145
8 152
8:3-9 170
8:4 144
8:23 146
9:1-3 162
12:1-2 80
13:13 144
14:14 144
14:17 71
16:1 214
16:1-2 238, 263
16:1-7 194
16:1-15 258
16:3 258
16:3-4 119
16:7 18, 214, 258
16:9 258
16:13 238

1 Corinthians 133, 173
1:1 38
1:23 99
1:30 146
2:2 98
7 187
12:4-11 200
12:12-13 181
13:13 241
15:32 18, 236
16:9 193
16:17 245
16:21 230, 253

2 Corinthians 133, 173
1:1 37, 38
1:8-10 18, 115
2:12 193
8:4 47
11:2 158
11:23 16

Galatians 133, 172, 181
1:1 38
1:18 162
3:28 4, 104, 131, 164, 181
6:11 230, 253
6:18 258

Ephesians 133, 136–37, 152, 157, 159, 162, 174, 187–88
3:1 235
5:21–6:9 123, 136, 179
5:25-27 158
6:10-17 52
6:20 18
6:21 194

Philippians 133
1:1 211, 237
2:6-11 149
2:19-20 141

2:25 239
3 162
3:2 169
4:23 258

Colossians
1:1 237
1:7 258
4 260
4:7-9 219
4:10 258
4:10-14 257
4:11 257
4:12 258
4:16 219
4:17 219, 239
4:18 18, 253

1 Thessalonians 133
1:1 37, 237
5:28 258

2 Thessalonians 133
3:17 253

1 Timothy 133, 141, 157
2:9-15 136

2 Timothy 133, 141, 157
1:15-17 13
1:16 18
2:9 17
4:10 13, 258
4:11 258
4:12 194
4:16 13

Titus 133, 157
2:1-10 179
2:2-10 136
3:12 194

Philemon 133, 187, 196
1:1 16, 18, 37
1:9 16
1:10 18
1:13 18
1:23 18
1:24 13

Hebrews
1:3 150
1:3-4 149

James
1:1 240

1 Peter 188, 194
2:13–3:7 136
2:18–3:7 179

Revelation 188
17:1-18 77

Index of Subjects

Acts of Paul, 235, 258
African American reception of Philemon, 208–12, 216–17
Alexander, Loveday, 22
Alzugarat, Alfred 22–23
Ambrose of Milan, 206
Ana, Marcos, 114
Andronicus, 258
Apphia, 203, 224, 228, 237–40, 259, 263
Aquila, 258
Archippus, 195, 199, 203, 219, 228, 237–40, 259
Aristarchus, 257, 258
Athanasius, 205–6, 209
Augustine, 206
Augustus, 14–15
authorship, 129, 131, 132–34, 136, 151, 196
autograph formulae, 253–55

Balz, Horst, 43
baptism, 131, 132, 134, 135, 138, 144, 145, 146, 149, 152, 157, 160, 162, 167, 170, 171, 173, 176, 181, 187, 188, 189, 191, 199
Barnes, Albert, 207, 220
"Barnes Hypothesis," 220
Barthes, Roland, 8–9
Basil of Caesarea, 205, 209
Benveniste, Emile, 58
Betancourt, Ingrid, 21
Bockmuehl, Markus, 69, 77, 80, 100, 109, 111
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, 8–9, 22–23, 45, 92, 100–101, 106
Borgen Project, 264
Brown, Colin, 72

Caesar, 3, 14, 16, 59–60, 63, 65, 77, 84, 92–93, 100, 109, 118
Camarero, Jesús, 10
Cardoso, Nancy, 3
care, 2, 4, 21, 43, 48–49, 57, 69, 75, 91, 111
Carter, Warren, 3
Cassidy, Richard, 2, 11–14, 18, 52, 63, 75–76, 89, 99–100
Castelli, Elizabeth A., 2–3, 97
censorship, 2, 6, 14, 32, 58, 63, 77–78, 84, 93, 99, 105–6, 111, 120, 130
Christ hymn, 130, 135, 136, 137, 146, 147, 149–56, 157, 159, 160, 167, 168, 173, 174, 177, 181, 188

circumcision, 90, 91, 96, 97, 98, 101, 131, 167, 168, 170, 174, 175, 176, 194
Claudius, 14
Clement of Rome, 16, 105
Colcock Jones, Charles, 208, 210
Colombo, Claire Miller, 126–27
commitment, 2, 18, 24, 35, 44, 48–49, 60, 68, 78, 81–82, 93, 95, 102, 111, 114, 116
conflict, 52, 68, 71, 95, 105, 108, 111
contemplation, contemplative reading, 127, 129–30, 154, 163, 164, 181, 192
Conti, Cristina, 3
Cooley, Paula M., 76
Cortés Copete, J. M., 117
Cousar, Charles B., 77, 104, 110
creation, 150, 151–52, 153, 154, 184, 189
Croato, Severino, 3, 8

De la Torre, Gonzalo, 3
Demas, 13, 195, 257–58
Dodd, Brian J., 47, 71–72
Douglass, Frederick, 261
Dunn, James D. G., 133, 141, 168, 196, 229

Eakin, William R., 76
Eco, Umberto, 42
ecotheology, 152
Elaw, Zilpha, 248, 261
Elliott, Neil, 3
Epaminondas of Acrephia, 117
Epaphras, 134, 143, 144, 194, 195, 257, 258
Epaphroditus, 5, 11, 13, 19, 20, 21, 37, 41, 45, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 91, 97, 99, 101, 104, 105, 108, 109, 112, 114, 115, 116, 118, 119, 121, 239
Epictetus, 15
Erasmus, 105
erro Slave, 220–24, 247, 249, 250, 251, 259

Fee, Gordon D., 22, 40–41, 54, 82, 89, 105, 118, 216
female slaves, 223–24, 249–50
fictive kinship language, 247–49
Filipino Christians, 202–3
Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, 152, 172, 187, 196
Flavius Josephus, 17, 169
Foulkes, Irene, 3
Fowl, Stephen, 47, 71
Frei Betto, 9, 20–25, 50–51, 56, 61
"Fugitive" or "Runaway" Slave Hypothesis, 214–25
Fugitive Slave Act, 208
Fugitive Slave Law, 211, 261, 264

Gaius, 14
Gaspar, Karl, 9, 21–22, 44, 95
gender, 2, 4, 7–8, 39, 43, 70

Harrington, Daniel J., 39, 69, 104, 115
Herod Agrippa, 17
hierarchy, hierarchicalization, 39, 159, 162, 171, 174
Hillesum, Etty, 9, 21–23, 94–95, 113
Horsley, Richard, 3
hospitality, 19, 105, 129, 242, 249–51, 253, 257
Houlden, J. L., 53
household code, 136, 137, 147, 153, 173–74, 175, 179, 180, 181, 184–92, 197

Ignatius of Antioch, 255–56
imprisonment of Paul, 12–13, 16, 25, 44, 47, 48, 51, 53, 54, 82, 93, 107, 118, 133, 193, 196, 198, 232, 235–36, 240, 244, 245
"intercession hypothesis," 221
intratextuality, 10, 68, 99

John Calvin, 206, 209
John Chrysostom, 204–6, 209, 260
Johnson, E. Elizabeth, 148–49

Junia, 134, 194, 214, 258
justice, 2, 4, 21, 35, 42, 47–49, 52, 66, 69, 71, 75, 77, 88, 90–93, 97, 111, 112, 145, 146, 263, 264
Justinian's Digest, 221

Kahl, Brigitte, 3
Keesmaat, Sylvia C., 145
Keller, Catherine, 130
Kittredge, Cynthia Briggs, 118n6, 125n, 126, 127, 136n, 142n3, 151n12, 152, 174n
Koperski, Verónica, 44, 104
Krüger, René, 3

law, Roman law, 12, 13–16, 21, 76–77, 88, 89–93, 221, 222
Lebrón, Lolita, 21
letter structure, 228–30
letter types, 226–27
letters from prison, prisoners, 2, 15, 20–22, 45, 53, 58, 84, 85, 93, 111–12, 120
Lightfoot, Joseph B., 209
Loh, I-Jin, 59, 79, 89
Lohmeyer, Ernest, 59, 72
López, Davina C., 3
López, Mercedes, 3
Louw, J. P., 42
Lucian of Samosata, 11, 15–16
Luke, 257
Luxemburg, Rosa, 21, 45–46

MacDonald, Margaret Y., 150, 162, 172, 173, 181, 196
Mackandal, 61
maiestas, 13–14, 84, 120, 122
Mandela, Nelson, 9, 21–23, 27–28, 57
Marchal, Joseph, 2–3, 8, 51, 246
Marcionite Prologue to Colossians, 236
Mark, 257
marriage, 124, 173–74, 179, 186, 187, 188, 191, 199
Martin Luther, 207, 209
Martin, Ralph P., 47, 71
McDaniel, Jay B., 76
McFague, Sallie, 138
Mena, Maricel, 3
Mesters, Carlos, 3
metaphors for Christ
  cosmic Christ, 149, 151, 153, 154, 156, 160, 162, 163, 164, 176, 177, 199
  head of body, 150, 153, 155–56, 163, 168, 170, 171, 176, 187
  kyriarchal, 124, 127, 152, 153, 188, 189
  militaristic, 145, 167, 175
metaphors for salvation
  circumcision. *See* circumcision
  clothing, 182–83, 184, 189
  hierarchical, masculine, 138–40, 145–47, 159
  legal, 158, 171
  marriage, presentation, 158
  organic, feminine, 138–40, 145, 147–48, 150–51, 160, 168, 176
  redemption, 146–48, 159, 160, 163, 176
Míguez, Néstor, 3

Navia Velasco, Carmiña, 9, 21–23, 33, 63, 101
Nero, 14, 17, 19, 78, 117, 137
Nida, Eugene A., 42, 59, 79, 89
Nympha, Nymphas, 134, 142, 195, 196, 197

Oakes, Peter, 19, 39, 41, 115, 118
Origen, 105
Osiek, Carolyn, 40, 66, 75, 89, 101

philosophy, 137, 143, 147, 160, 161, 167, 168, 169–70, 172, 173, 175
Phoebe, 40, 134, 194, 214, 238, 263
Pixley, Jorge, 3
Pliny the Younger, 218, 221, 222, 226

political prisoner, 2, 4, 6, 10, 21, 23, 25, 33, 42, 44, 45, 56, 56, 57, 58, 60, 61, 63, 82, 84, 97, 100, 103, 106, 107, 113, 114, 120
Portefaix, Lilian, 7, 19, 67, 102
Prisca, 194, 238, 258

Rahtjen, Bruce, 87
Renan, 105
Reumann, John, 18, 55, 68, 83, 96, 105, 112
rhetoric, 3, 50, 83, 89, 96, 97, 131, 137, 142, 144, 171, 173, 213, 230–32
Richard, Pablo, 3
Richter Reimer, Ivoni, 3, 40, 105
Ricoeur, Paul, 8
Roman citizenship, citizen, 6, 16, 19, 38–39, 53, 66–68, 74, 89, 92–93, 95–100, 103, 111, 120
Roman Empire, 3, 8, 11, 14, 16, 21, 49, 52, 54, 66–68, 74–76, 83, 88, 95, 99, 100, 106, 110–11, 117–19, 120, 138, 222, 259
Roman secret police, 2, 4, 15, 83
Ryan, Judith M., 39, 104

Sabinianus, 218, 221, 222, 226
Sallustio, 12
Santos Yanguas, Narciso Vicente, 14
Schneider, Gerhard, 43
Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, 38, 40, 95, 103, 152, 172, 187, 196
Schütrumpf, Jörn, 46
Schwantes, Milton, 3
Scott, James C., 14–15
Scroggs, Robin, 6
Serrano de Barragán, Neila, 9, 21–23, 26–32, 50, 106, 108
Silva de Lima, Silvia Regina, 3
Silva, Moisés, 112
slaves, slavery, xx, 4, 7, 19, 21, 27, 38–39, 41, 50, 53, 66–68, 73–78, 92, 98–100, 103, 105, 111, 118–19, 122, 123–25, 127, 131–32, 138, 146–47, 152, 159, 169, 174–75, 179–82, 184–88, 190–92, 197, 199–200, 202–14, 217–27, 229, 231, 233–36, 239–40, 243–51, 255, 257, 259–64
  slave names, 211, 220, 235, 245–51
  slave rebellion, 202–7, 210, 217–20, 224–27
  slavery (contemporary forms), 264
  slaves (as business partners), 250–51, 259, 263
  slaves (sexual use of), 246
solidarity, 8, 21, 24, 34, 38, 42, 45–49, 53, 61, 66–68, 70, 72–76, 78, 83–84, 91, 94, 96–100, 112, 114–21, 233, 234, 236
Standhartinger, Angela, 2, 11–19, 47, 63, 74, 78, 87
Stowe, Harriett Beecher, 208
subordination, submission, 3, 123–24, 125–26 134, 138, 147, 148, 152, 155, 169, 171, 173, 175, 184–86, 196
Sumney, Jerry L., 146, 172

Tamez, Elsa, 13, 17, 103
theopoetics, 126, 127–30, 132, 138, 140, 147–49, 153–56, 159–60, 162–65, 174–77, 181–84, 191–92, 197–200
Third Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, 235
Thomas Aquinas, 206
Thurston, Bonnie B., 39, 69, 104, 115
Tiberius, 14
Timothy, 5, 13, 20, 37, 38, 45, 81, 82, 83, 91, 97, 99, 114, 118, 119, 120, 133, 134, 141, 142, 196, 228, 235, 237, 238, 240
Tinsley, Annie, 127, 190–91
Tupac Amaru, 61
Tychichus, 219

Undo, Schnelle, 17
Urbanus, 258

Vaage, Leif E., 6
Ventura, Tirsa, 3

Walsh, Brian J., 145
Wansink, Craig S., 2, 11–13, 62
Wengst, Klaus, 16, 110
Williams, Demetrius K., 73, 201, 209–12
Williams, Dolores S., 76
Wimbush, Vincent L., 6, 216
Wire, Antoinette, 152, 173
Wisdom/Sophia, 35, 63, 143, 144, 150, 151, 153, 160, 161, 163, 164, 169, 171, 172, 176, 183, 184
Witherington, Ben, III, 22, 74, 89, 102, 112, 172

General Editor

Barbara E. Reid, OP, is a Dominican Sister of Grand Rapids, Michigan. She holds a PhD in biblical studies from The Catholic University of America and is vice president and academic dean and professor of New Testament studies at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. Her most recent publications are *Wisdom's Feast: An Invitation to Feminist Interpretation of the Scriptures* (2016) and *Abiding Word: Sunday Reflections on Year A, B, C* (3 vols.; 2011, 2012, 2013). She served as president of the Catholic Biblical Association in 2014–2015.

Volume Editor

Dr. Mary Ann Beavis is professor in the Department of Religion and Culture, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan. She is the author of many articles and several books in the subject areas of biblical studies and religious studies.

Authors

Elsa Tamez is a Mexican-Costarrican New Testament biblical scholar and earned her ThD at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. She is a member of the Methodist church and is professor emerita and former rector of the Latin American Biblical University.

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge is dean and president and professor of New Testament at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas.

Claire Miller Colombo is director of the Center for Writing and Creative Expression at Seminary of the Southwest, where she also teaches in the areas of theopoetics, theology and literature, and writing.

Alicia J. Batten is associate professor of religious studies and theology at Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo.